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A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

1942 EDITION

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FOREWORD

Here is a superb selection of All Fiction Detective Stories sure to provide that needed relaxation in these strenuous war days. Each story selected has been proven to be exceptional by the test of previous publication in one of Street & Smith's detective or mystery magazines.

The name of Ellery Queen is known to all mystery fans, whether readers, radio listeners, or movie-goers. His "House of Haunts," starting on page 3, is a Class 1 thriller. Frank Gruber, who wrote "The Murder Gun," is the newest sensation in the detective field, producing about six books a year—all good sellers. Steve Fisher, the author of "The Monster," wrote the novel, "I Wake Up Screaming," from which this year's most successful detective motion picture was made. Fisher also wrote "To the Shores of Tripoli," the great service picture of the year.

Other top-ranking authors included in this issue are Norbert Davis, Walter Ripperger, Edward Ronns and William E. Barrett.

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HOUSE OF HAUNTS

by ELLERY QUEEN

The tale of Sylvester Mayhew's house is a strange one. Before the whole fantastic thing was bared, God Himself came into it—and that is what makes this the most remarkable adventure in which Ellery Queen became involved.

I.

If a story began, "Once upon a time in a house set down in wilderness there lived an old and eremitic creature named Mayhew, a crazy man who had buried two wives—and this house was even known as the Black House"—if a story began in this way, it would strike no one as especially remarkable. There are people like that who live in houses like that, and very often mysteries materialize about them—rational mysteries capable of rational explanation.

Now Mr. Ellery Queen doted on rational mysteries. Inside his skull there was a perfectly oiled and spick-and-span machine which functioned as neatly and inexorably as the planetary system. If there was a mystery about one Sylvester Mayhew, deceased, and his buried wives and gloomy dwelling, you may be sure the Queen brain would seize upon it and analyze it in its customary clean and shining manner. Rationality, that was it. No esoteric mumbo-jumbo could fool *that* fellow. His feet were planted solidly on God's footstool, and one and one made two—always—and that's all there was to that.

Of course, Macbeth had said that stones have been known to move and trees to speak. But, pshaw, for these literary fancies! In this day and age? Nonsense. The truth is, Mr. Queen would have said, there is something harsh and cruel about the world we live in that's very rough on miracles. Miracles just don't happen any more. Everybody with a grain of intelligence knows that.

Oh, yes, there are yogis, voodoos, fakirs, shamans, and other tricksters from the effete East and benighted Africa, but nobody pays any attention to *them*. This is a reasonable world, and everything that happens in it must have a reasonable explanation. That's common sense, isn't it?

You can't expect a sane person to believe, for instance, that a genuine three-dimensional, flesh-

and-blood human being could suddenly stoop, grab his shoelaces, and fly away. Or that a water buffalo could change into a golden-haired little boy before your eyes. Or that a man dead one hundred and thirty-six years could push aside his tombstone, step out of his grave, yawn, and then sing three verses of "Mademoiselle from Armentières." Or even, for that matter, that a stone could move or a tree speak—yea, though it were in the language of Atlantis or Mu.

Or can you?

The tale of Sylvester Mayhew's house is a strange tale. When what happened happened, minds tottered and porcelain beliefs threatened to shatter into shards. Before the whole fantastic and incomprehensible business was bared, God Himself came into it. Yes, God came into the story of Sylvester Mayhew's house, and that is what makes this quite the most remarkable adventure in which Mr. Ellery Queen, that pince-nez'd, pinch-nostriled, and indomitable cynic, has ever become involved.

The car, a chipped and battered sedan, fled down the deserted Merrick Road on Long Island as if it were trying to run away from the weather. The sky was gray lead, frowning and gloomy, and under it the countryside lay cowering. It was cold in the dark drafty tonneau of the car, and its four occupants were for the most part occupied with stamping their feet to keep the blood circulating. One was an old man. One was a young man, and the third was simply a fat man.

The fourth was a subdued young woman who a few hours earlier had disembarked from an ocean liner to find that travel, while broadening, is not an unmixed blessing. It had led her into an unfriendly land whose greeting had been the announcement that her father was dead. Since Alice Mayhew had not seen her father since her infancy, the news of his death depressed rather than shocked her. She had merely expected to find him alive. But then she was accustomed to blasted expectations. Her dead mother's last relative had died only a few months before. She had no money. She had never had much happiness in America, where she had been born, or in England, where she had been raised. She had always had to work for her living, and nothing of a startling or romantic nature had ever happened to her.

She stared through the dusty side window of the car at the bleak countryside, with a rather bitter curl of her lips.

The old man, who might have been her uncle, was her attorney. The fat man, who might have been her attorney, was her uncle. As for the young man, he was a quietly lean enigma who had sauntered up at the pier, bag in hand, greeted the old man, bowed to the fat man, smiled at the young woman, and accompanied them without invitation to the fat man's car.

The fat man, who was driving, turned the car into a frightful byroad along which they jolted in an unsteady eastward curve between leafless woods. The road was a phantasmagoria of pits and ruts frozen hard. The woods were crazy tangles of dead trees and underbrush densely packed, but looking as if they had been repeatedly seared by fire.

"Looks like no man's land," said the young man at last, bouncing up and down. "And feels like it, too, by George!"

Dr. Reinach's vast fleshy back heaved in a silent chuckle. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Queen, that's exactly what it's called by the natives. Land God forgot, eh?"

"It isn't very inviting-looking, is it?" remarked Alice Mayhew in a low voice.

"Oh, it wasn't always this way," said the fat man, swelling his cheeks like a bullfrog. He was a mound of flesh, filling the driver's seat to overflowing. "Once it was pleasant enough. I remember it as a boy. Then it seemed as if it might become the nucleus of a populous community. But civilization's passed it by, and a few forest fires did the rest."

"It's horrible," said Alice, "simply horrible."

"No, no, my dear, don't give way to slush. What's the difference? All life is a pitiful struggle to paint a veneer over the realities. Everything is rotten and, worse than that, a bore. Hardly worth living, when it comes to that. But if you must live, by thunder," chuckled Dr. Reinach, "you may as well do so in consistent surroundings!"

The old attorney stirred in the rear where he was crouched in his greatcoat like a pupa which has died prematurely in its cocoon. His ordinarily sleek cobalt cheeks were covered with a straggly stubble. His eyes were haggard and fierce. "You're quite a philosopher, Dr. Reinach!"

"I'm an honest man."

"Do you know, doctor," murmured Mr. Ellery Queen, "there are some folk who seem to inhabit dark and noisome caverns, out of which they crawl once in a while to poison the atmosphere of mankind."

The fat man glanced at him. Then he said in his deep voice: "And do you agree with this mysterious young friend of yours, Thorne?"

"I believe," said the old man dryly, "there is a platitude extant which says that actions speak with considerably more volume than words. I haven't shaved in six days, and this is the first time I have left Sylvester Mayhew's house since his funeral."

"You wrong us all." Dr. Reinach smiled. "You wrong us all, Thorne. And I'm afraid you're giving my niece quite the most erroneous impression of her family. We're odd, no doubt, and our blood is probably turning sour after so many generations of cold storage. But then don't the finest vintages come from the deepest cellars? You've only to glance at Alice to see my point. Such vital love-

liness could only have been produced by an old family."

"My mother," said the young woman, with a faint loathing in her glance, "had something to do with that, Uncle Herbert."

"Your mother, my dear," replied the fat man, "was merely a contributory factor. You have the Mayhew features."

Alice did not reply. Her uncle, whom she had never seen before, was obscene. The others, waiting for them at their destination, she had never seen at all, and she had no great hope that they would prove better. A livid streak ran through her father's family. He had been a paranoiac with delusions of persecution. There was an Aunt Sarah in the dark distance, her father's sister. And Aunt Sarah was, to judge from Dr. Reinach's adroit evasions, something of a character. There was also an Aunt Milly, Dr. Reinach's wife. But whatever she might have been in the past, one had only to look at Dr. Reinach to see what she undoubtedly was in the present.

The road kept lurching toward the east in a curve. The car crashed on, jolting them about.

At last Dr. Reinach steered the car leftward off the road into a narrow, wretchedly graveled driveway and stopped between two houses. These structures stood side by side, separated by only the width of the driveway, which led to a ramshackle garage placed between and a little behind the houses. The three buildings, huddled in a ragged clearing, surrounded by the dessicated tangle of woods, like three desert islands in an empty sea.

"Welcome home, Alice," said the fat man heartily. "That's the ancestral mansion to the left."

The house to the left of the car was of stone—once gray, but now so tarnished by the elements that it was almost black. Its face was blotched and streaky, as if it had succumbed to an insensate leprosy. Rising three stories, elaborately ornamented with stone flora and gargoyles, it was unmistakably early Victorian in its architecture. The façade had a neglected, granular look that only great age could have imparted. The whole structure appeared to have thrust its roots into the forsaken landscape into which it had been set. Alice Mayhew stared at it with a sort of horror. It had nothing of the pleasant hoariness of old English mansions. It was simply old, old with the dreadful age of this seared and blasted countryside.

"Sylvester called it the Black House," continued Dr. Reinach, turning off his ignition. "Not pretty, I admit, but as solid as the day it was built."

"Black House," muttered old Thorne. "Rubbish!"

"Do you mean to say," gasped Alice, "that father, mother lived *here?*"

"Oh, certainly. Quaint name, eh, Thorne? Another illustration of Sylvester's preoccupation with the morbidly colorful. Built by your grandfather, Alice, seventy years ago. The old gentleman put up this one, too, later. I believe you'll find it considerably more habitable. Where the deuce is everyone?"

The fat man heavily descended and held the rear door open for his niece. Mr. Ellery Queen slipped down to the driveway on the other side and glanced about with the sharp, uneasy air of a wild animal. The old mansion's companion house was a much smaller and less pretentious dwelling, two stories high and built of an originally white stone which had turned gray. The front door was shut and the curtains at the lower windows were drawn. But there was a fire burning somewhere within. He caught the leaping glimmers. In the next moment they were blotted out by the head of an old woman, who wildly pressed her ancient face to one of the panes for an instant and then vanished. But the door remained shut.

"You'll stop with us, of course," said the doctor genially.

Ellery circled the car. His three companions were standing in the driveway, the young woman pressed close to old Thorne as if for protection.

"You won't want to sleep in the Black House, Alice," murmured the doctor. "No one's there. It's in rather a mess—and a house of death, you know."

"Stop it," said the lawyer grimly. "You're as tactful as a full-grown hippopotamus. Can't you see the poor child's half dead from fright as it is?"

"Melodrama, Thorne? Come, Alice, I'm a blunt old codger, but I mean well. It will really be more comfortable in the White House." He chuckled suddenly again. "White House. That's what *I* named it, to preserve the atmospheric balance, as it were."

"There's something frightfully wrong somewhere," said Alice in a calm voice. "Mr. Thorne, what is it? There's been nothing but innuendo and concealed hostility since we met at the pier. And why precisely did you spend six days in father's house after the funeral? I think I've a right to know."

Thorne licked his lips. "Perhaps I shouldn't—"

"Tut, tut," said the fat man. "Are we to freeze here all day?"

Alice drew her thin coat more closely about her. "You're all being beastly. Would you mind, Uncle Herbert? I should like to see the inside—where father and mother were—"

"As you wish, my child," said Dr. Reinach tenderly. And he glanced once over his shoulder at the building he had called the White House. "May as well do it now and get it over with. There's still light enough to see by. Then we'll go over, wash up, have a good dinner, and you'll feel better." He seized the girl's arm and marched her across the dead-twig-strewn ground toward the dark building. "I believe," continued the doctor blandly, as they

Suddenly she stopped coughing and ran to a large faded chromo, propped against the yellowish wall. "It's mother," she said slowly.

mounted the steps of the porch, "that Mr. Thorne has the keys."

The girl stood quietly waiting, her dark eyes studying the faces of the three men. The old attorney was pale, but his lips were set in a stubborn line. He did not reply. Taking a bunch of rusty keys out of a carefully buttoned pocket of his suit, he fitted one into the lock of the front door. It turned over with a creak. Then Thorne pushed open the door and they stepped into the house.

The interior smelled of must and damp. The furniture, ponderous pieces which once no doubt had been regal, was uniformly dilapidated and dusty. The walls were peeling, showing the solid discolored stones beneath. The dirt and debris everywhere were appalling. It was almost inconceivable that a human being could have lived in this grubby ruin. They wandered about, silent, stepping over trash from room to room, impelled by something stronger than themselves.

Once Alice said in a strangled voice: "Uncle Herbert, didn't anyone take care of father? Didn't anyone ever clean up this awful place?" She shivered. "It looks like a house of haunts," she muttered.

The fat man shrugged. "He had notions in his old age, my dear. There wasn't much anyone could do with him. Perhaps we had better not go into details."

The sour smell filled their nostrils. They stumbled on.

On the middle floor they came upon a bedroom in which, according to the doctor, Sylvester Mayhew had died. The bed was unmade. Indeed, the impress of the dead man's body on the mattress and tumbled sheets could still be discerned. It was a bare and mean room, not as filthy as the others but infinitely more depressing. Alice began to cough.

She coughed and coughed, hopelessly, standing still in the center of the room and staring at the dirty bed in which she had been born.

Then suddenly she stopped coughing and ran over to a lopsided bureau. A large faded chromo was propped on it against the yellowish wall. She looked at it for a long time without touching it. Then she took it down.

"It's mother," she said slowly. "It's really mother. I'm glad now I came. He did love her, after all. He kept it all these years. I've only one portrait of mother, and that's a poor one." Surprise crept into her voice. "This—why, she was beautiful, wasn't she?"

The time-dulled colors revealed a stately young woman with luxuriant hair worn high. The features were piquant and regular. She stood in a queenly attitude, staring calmly back at them.

"Yes," sighed Dr. Reinach, "your mother was a beautiful woman."

"If he had left me nothing but this, it would have been worth the trip from England and all—all this." She trembled a little and hurried back to them, holding the chromo tightly. "Let's get out of here," she said in a shriller voice. "I don't like it here. It's ghastly. It—I'm afraid."

They left the house hastily, as if someone were after them. The old lawyer turned the key in the lock of the front door with exaggerated carefulness, glaring at Dr. Reinach's back as he did so. But the fat man had taken his niece's arm and was leading her across the driveway to the White House, whose windows were now flickering brightly with light and whose front door stood wide open.

As they crunched along behind, Ellery said sharply: "Thorne, give me a clew, a hint, anything. I am completely in the dark."

Thorne's unshaven face was haggard in the last rays of the setting sun. "Can't talk now. Suspect everything, everybody. I'll see you tonight, in your room—or wherever they put you, if you're alone. Queen, for Heaven's sake, be careful!"

"Careful?" muttered Ellery. "Why be careful?"

"As if your life depended on it." The old man's lips made a grim line. "For all I know, it does."

Then they were crossing the threshold of the White House.

II.

Mrs. Reinach was a pale and wizened midge, almost fragile in her delicacy of bone and skin, and she was plainly frightened. Even as she embraced her niece, she glanced with the apprehension of a sacrificial vestal at her husband. Although there was a roaring blaze in the age-blackened fireplace, she shivered a little. The low-ceilinged room was pleasant enough in a musty, old-fashioned way. A wide staircase with worn treads wound from one corner to the sleeping quarters above.

"So you're Aunt Milly," sighed Alice, pushing away. "You'll forgive me if I— It's all so very odd."

"You must be exhausted, poor darling," said Mrs. Reinach in a distressed voice. "And I quite understand. After all, we're strangers to you. Oh!" she said, and stopped. Her faded eyes were fixed on the chromo in the girl's hands. "Oh," she said after a moment. "I see you've been over to the other house already."

"Of course, she has," said the fat man, and his wife grew quite pale. "Now, Alice, why don't you let Milly take you upstairs and get you comfortable?"

"I am rather done in," confessed Alice wearily. She looked at her mother's picture and smiled a little. "I suppose you'll think I'm very silly, dashing in this way with just—" She did not finish. Instead, she went to the fireplace. There was a broad soot-darkened mantel above it crowded with ceramic gew-gaws of a vanished period. She set the chromo of the handsome Victorian woman up among them. "There! Now I feel much better."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Dr. Reinach, "don't stand on ceremony. Nick! Make yourself useful. Miss Mayhew's bags are strapped to the car."

A gigantic young man, who had been leaning against the wall, nodded in a surly way. He studied Alice Mayhew's clean young face for a moment with the strangest intensity. Then he went out.

"Who," murmured Alice, flushing, "is that?"

"Nick Keith." The fat man slipped off his coat and went to the fire to warm his flabby hands. "A rather morose protégé of mine. I'm sure you'll find him pleasant company, Alice, if only you can pierce that thick defensive armor he wears. Does odd jobs about the place, but don't let that hinder you. This is a democratic country."

"I'm sure he's very nice. Would you excuse me? Aunt Milly, I should very much like—"

The young man reappeared under a load of luggage, clumped across the living room, and staggered upstairs. And suddenly, as if at a signal, Mrs. Reinach broke out into a noisy twittering and took Alice's arm and led her across the room. They disappeared after Keith.

"As a medical man," chuckled the fat man, taking the wraps and stowing them in a hall closet, "I prescribe a large dose of this, gentlemen." He went to a cellaret and brought out a heavy old cut-glass decanter of brandy. "Very good for chilled stomach." He tossed off his own glass with an inhuman facility, and in the light of the fire the finely etched capillaries in his bulbous nose stood out clearly. "Ah-h! One of life's major compensations. Warming, eh? And now I suppose you feel the need of a little sprucing up yourselves. Come along, and I'll show you to your rooms."

"There's something about your house, doctor," said Ellery, "that is unusually soporific. Thank you, I think both Thorne and I would appreciate a brisk wash."

"You'll find it brisk enough," said Dr. Reinach, shaking with silent laughter. "This is the forest primeval, you know. Not only haven't we any electric light or gas or telephone, but we've no running water, either. Well behind the house keeps us supplied. It's fun when you get used to it.

The simple life. Well, well, you must be tired of this prattle. Up we go."

The chilly corridor of the wood-heated house made them shiver. The fat man, carrying candles and matches, showed the lawyer into a room overlooking the front of the house, and Ellery into one on the far side. A fire burned crisply in the small fireplace, and the basin on the old-fashioned washstand was filled with numbing water.

"Hope you find it comfortable," drawled Dr. Reinach, lounging in the doorway. "We were expecting only Thorne and my niece, but we lead a rough-and-tumble life here, and one more can always be accommodated. Ah—colleague of Thorne's, I believe he said?"

"Something like that," said Ellery. "If you don't mind—"

"Not at all." Reinach lingered, eying Ellery with a smile.

Ellery shrugged, stripped off his coat, and made his ablutions. And then, with rather pointed nonchalance, he opened his bag. A .38 police revolver lay on top of his haberdashery.

"Do you always carry a gun, Mr. Queen?" murmured the fat man.

"Always." Ellery slipped the revolver into his coat pocket.

"Charming." He stroked his triple chin. "Charming! Well, Mr. Queen, I'll see how Thorne is getting on. Come right downstairs when you're ready. Mrs. Reinach has a smacking good dinner prepared." Still smiling, he vanished.

Ellery straightened up at once. He ran to the door to lock it and halted abruptly. There was no lock. Where a lock had been there was a splintery hole, and the splinters had a newish look about them. He placed a rickety chair against the door and began to prowl.

He raised the mattress from the ponderous frame of the old bed and poked about beneath it. He opened closets and drawers. He felt the worn blue carpet for wires. But after ten minutes he gave up, angry with himself, and went to the one window of the bedroom. The prospect was so dismal that he scowled in sheer misery. Just brown stripped woods and a leaden sky. The old mansion was on the other side of the house. A veiled sun was setting. A bank of storm clouds slipped aside for a moment, and the brilliant rim of the sun shone directly into his eyes, making him see colored dots. Then other clouds moved up and the sun slipped below the horizon. The room darkened rapidly.

Lock taken out, eh? Someone had worked fast. They could not have known he was coming, for Thorne had telephoned him from the pier as the lawyer and Dr. Reinach had waited for the *Coronia* to clear quarantine. Then someone must have seen him through the window as the car stopped in the drive. The old woman? A few moments' work by a skilled hand at the door. He wondered thoughtfully if Thorne's door had been similarly mutilated —and Alice Mayhew's.

The lawyer and Dr. Reinach were already seated before the fire when Ellery came down, and the fat man was rumbling: "Just as well. Give the poor girl a chance to return to normal. With the shock she's had today, it might be the finishing blow. I've told Mrs. Rienach to break it to her gently. Ah, Queen. Come over here and join us. We'll have dinner as soon as Alice gets downstairs."

"Dr. Reinach was just apologizing," said Thorne casually, without glancing at Ellery, "for this Aunt Sarah of Miss Mayhew's—Sylvester Mayhew's sister, Mrs. Fell. The excitement of anticipating her niece's arrival seems to have been a bit too much for her."

"Indeed," said Ellery, and he sat down and lighted a cigarette.

"Fact is," said the fat man, picking up his glass, "my poor half sister is cracked."

"But not hopelessly shattered, I trust."

The doctor smiled. "The family paranoia. Another drink, Queen? She's off balance. Not violent, you understand, but it's wise to humor her. She isn't normal, and for Alice to see her—"

"Paranoia," said Ellery. "An unfortunate family, it appears. Your half brother Sylvester's weakness seems to have expressed itself in rubbish and solitude. What's Mrs. Fell's delusion?"

"She thinks her daughter is still alive. Common enough. As a matter of fact, poor Olivia was killed in an automobile accident three years ago. It shocked Sarah's maternal instinct out of plumb. She's been looking forward to seeing Alice, and it may prove awkward. Never can tell how a diseased mind will react to an unusual situation."

"For that matter," drawled Ellery, "I should have said the same remark might be made about any mind, diseased or not."

Dr. Reinach laughed silently again. Thorne, hunched by the fire, said: "This Keith boy."

The fat man set his glass down slowly. "Yes? What about him?"

The lawyer stared for an instant. Then he shrugged.

Dr. Reinach picked up his glass again. "Am I imagining things, or is there the vaguest hint of hostility in the air? Don't worry yourself about Keith, Thorne—if you must worry about anything. We let Nick pretty much alone. He's sour on the whole world, which demonstrates his good sense. But I'm afraid he hasn't the philosophic stability to rise above his wisdom. You'll probably find him antisocial. Ah, there you are, my dear! Lovely, lovely."

Alice was wearing a different gown, a simple unfrilled frock, and she had freshened up. There was color in her cheeks and her eyes were sparkling. Seeing her for the first time clearly and without her

hat and coat, Ellery thought she looked different, as all women contrive to look different divested of their outer clothing. Apparently the ministrations of another woman, too, had cheered her. The rings were still under her eyes, but her smile was not as wan.

"Thank you, Uncle Herbert." Her voice was slightly husky. "But I do think I've caught a nasty cold."

"Whiskey and a hot lemonade," said the fat man promptly. "Eat lightly and go to bed early."

"To tell the truth, I'm famished!"

"Then eat as much as you like. I'm one hell of a physician, as you no doubt have already decided. Shall we go in to dinner?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Reinach in a frightened voice. "We shan't wait for Sarah—or Nicholas."

Alice's eyes dulled a little. Then she sighed and took the fat man's arm and they all trooped into the dining room.

As they returned to the living room, Thorne whispered to the girl: "Is everything all right? Are you quite—"

"I'm a little scarish, I think," she said quietly, in an undertone. "Mr. Thorne, please don't think me horrible, but there's something so strange about . . . everything. I . . . wish now I hadn't come."

The old man's face set. "Has any of these people—"

"No, no. It's just that they're really strangers to me. I suppose it's my imagination and this cold. Would you greatly mind if I went to bed? Tomorrow will be time enough to talk."

Thorne patted her hand. She smiled gratefully, murmured an apology, and went upstairs with Mrs. Reinach again.

Feet stamped somewhere in the rear of the house as the men settled themselves before the fire.

"Must be Nick," grunted the doctor. "Now where's *he* been?"

The gigantic young man appeared in the living-room archway, glowering. His boots, high-laced lumberman's boots, were soggy with wet. He growled: "Hello," and in a surly manner went to the fire and spread his strong, work-worn hands. He paid no attention whatever to Thorne, although he glanced once—swiftly—at Ellery in passing.

"Where've you been, Nick?"

"Hauling in firewood. Something you didn't think of doing." Keith's tone was truculent, but Ellery noticed that his hands were twitching. "It's snowing."

They crowded to the windows. Outside the night was moonless and palpable, and big fat snowflakes were sliding down the windowpanes in a thick bombardment.

"You haven't had any dinner," said Dr. Reinach in a caressing tone, putting his arm about the young man's shoulders.

"Not hungry."

"Feeling all right, Nick?"

"All right," said Keith shortly. He flung the fat arm off.

"Ah," said the doctor with a queer satisfaction. "Nick, meet Mr. Queen. You know Mr. Thorne already." The young man shook hands without meeting their eyes. "Come, come, my boy, buck up. You're too emotional. Let's all have a drink. Weather isn't too kind to nerves."

Nerves, thought Ellery grimly. His nostrils were pinched, sniffing the little mysteries in the air. Thorne was tied up in knots, as if he had cramps. The veins of his temples were pale-blue strings, and there was perspiration on his forehead. Above their heads the house was soundless. Dr. Reinach began hauling bottles out of the cellaret—gin, bitters, rye, vermouth. He busied himself mixing drinks, talking incessantly. There was a pur in his hoarse undertones, a vibration of pure excitement. What in Satan's name, thought Ellery intently, was going on here?

Keith passed the cocktails around, and Ellery's eyes warned Thorne. "Don't drink too much." Thorne nodded slightly. They had two drinks apiece and refused more. Keith drank doggedly, as if he were anxious to forget something.

"Now, that's better," said Dr. Reinach, settling his bulk in an easy-chair. "With the women out of the way and warmth and liquor, life becomes almost bearable."

"I'm afraid," said Thorne, "that I shall prove a disturbing influence. I'm going to make it unbearable."

Dr. Reinach blinked. "Well, now," he said. "Well, now." He pushed the cut-glass brandy decanter carefully out of the way of his elbow and folded his pudgy hands on his stomach. His little purple eyes shone strangely.

The lawyer turned his back. "I'm here in Miss Mayhew's interests, Dr. Reinach. In her interests alone. Do I make myself clear?"

"Not," said the doctor, "too clear."

"Then I'll make myself even clearer. Sylvester Mayhew died last week very suddenly. Died while waiting to see the daughter whom he hadn't seen since his divorce from her mother almost twenty years ago."

"Factually exact."

Thorne spun about abruptly. "Dr. Reinach, you acted as Mayhew's physician for over a year before his death. What was the matter with him?"

"A variety of things. Nothing startling. He died, as you know, of a cerebral hemorrhage."

"So your certificate claimed." The lawyer smiled. "I'm not entirely convinced that your certificate told the truth."

The doctor stared for an instant, then he slapped his bulging thigh. "Splendid!" he cried. "Splendid! A man after my own heart. Thorne, you

have potentialities." He turned on Ellery, beaming. "You hear, Mr. Queen? Your friend openly accuses me of murder. Delightful, delightful, Thorne. This is becoming quite exciting. You believe I employed some cunning professional device—a subtle piosoning, perhaps, an injection of pure oxygen into a vein—to speed poor Sylvester to his heavenly reward?"

"I don't know the precise method used. Mind you, I'm not saying that—"

The fat man clucked. "Don't spoil things, Thorne. So! Old Reinach's a fratricide. Why don't you exhume the body?"

"I intend to," said Thorne coldly, "at the very first opportunity."

"Hear! What do you think of that, Nick? Your old patron accused of cold-blooded murder. Dear, dear."

"That's nonsense, Mr. Thorne," snapped the young man. "You don't believe it yourself."

The lawyer's gaunt cheeks became taut. "Whether I believe it or not is immaterial. The possibility exists. But I'm more concerned with Alice Mayhew's interests. It's damnably queer that her father should have died when he did. Damnably."

For a long moment, there was silence. Dr. Reinach sipped his brandy with enjoyment. When he set his glass down, he sighed and said: "Gentlemen, life is too short to waste in cautious skirmishings. Let us proceed to the major engagement. Nick Keith is in my confidence, and we may speak freely before him." Keith closed his eyes. "Mr. Queen, you're very much in the dark, aren't you?"

Ellery shifted his right foot. "And how," he said, "did you know that?"

The fat man smiled benignly. "Pshaw. Thorne hadn't left the Black House since Sylvester's funeral. Nor has he received or sent any mail during his self-imposed vigil the past week. This morning he left me on the pier to telephone someone. You showed up shortly after. Since he was gone only a moment or so, it was obvious that he hadn't time to tell you much, if anything. Allow me to felicitate you, Mr. Queen, upon your conduct. It's been exemplary. An air of omniscience covering desperate ignorance."

Ellery removed his pince-nez and began to polish their lenses. "You're a psychologist as well as a medico, I see. Go on, doctor."

Thorne said harshly: "This is all beside the point."

"No, no, it's very much to the point," said the fat man in a sad bass. "Now the canker annoying your friend, Mr. Queen, is roughly this: My half brother Sylvester was a miser. If he'd been able to take his gold with him to the grave—with any assurance that it would remain there—I'm sure he would have done so. But he was not so unscrewed as to believe that gold acquires inviolability by being invested with the odor of sanctity."

"Gold?" asked Ellery, raising his eyebrows.

"You may well titter, Mr. Queen. There was something medieval about Sylvester's aberration. Unable to take the gold with him, he did the next best thing. He hid it."

"Oh," said Ellery. "You'll be pulling clanking ghosts out of your hat next."

"Hid it," said Dr. Reinach gently, "in the Black House."

"And Miss Alice Mayhew?"

"Poor child, a victim of circumstances. Sylvester never thought of her until recently, when she wrote from London that her last maternal relative had died. Wrote to Thorne, who had been recommended by some friend as a trustworthy solicitor. As he is, as he is! You see, Alice didn't even know if her father was alive, let alone where he was. Thorne, good Samaritan, located us, gave Alice's exhaustive letters and photographs to Sylvester, and has acted as liaison officer ever since. A rather circumspect one, by thunder!"

"This explanation is quite unnecessary," said the old lawyer stiffly. "Mr. Queen knows—"

"Nothing," murmured the fat man. "Let's be intelligent about this, Thorne. Now, Mr. Queen, Sylvester clutched at the thought of his new-found daughter with the pertinacity of a drowning man. I spread no secret when I say that Sylvester, in his paranoiac dotage, suspected his own family of having designs on his fortune."

"A monstrous libel, of course."

"Neatly put, neatly put! Well, he told Thorne in my presence that he had long since converted his fortune into specie, that he'd hidden this gold somewhere in the house next door, and that he wouldn't reveal the hiding place to anyone but Alice, who was to be his sole heir. You see?"

"I see," said Ellery.

"He died before Alice's arrival, as you already know. Is it any wonder, Mr. Queen, that Thorne thinks dire things of us?"

"This is fantastic," snapped Thorne, "fantastic. Naturally, in the interests of my client, I couldn't leave the premises unguarded with that mass of gold lying about loose somewhere."

"Naturally not," said the doctor. "And yet, have you analyzed the facts, my dear Thorne? Whom do you suspect of chicanery and larcenous intentions? Your humble servant? I assure you that I am a cynic in the noblest meaning of the word. Money means very little to me, and the usual scramble after a fortune merely amuses me. My half sister Sarah? An anile wreck, living in a world of illusion, quite as antediluvian as Sylvester—they were twins, you know—who isn't very long for this world and whose wants could not be better ministered to if she possessed all the riches of heaven's pavement. Then that leaves my estimable Milly and our saturnine young friend, Nick. Milly? Absurd. She hasn't had an idea, good or bad, for two

decades. Nick? Ah, an outsider? We may have hit something there! Is it Nick you suspect, Thorne?" chuckled Dr. Reinach.

Nick Keith got to his feet and glared down into the bland, damp lunar countenance of the fat man. In the sudden silence Ellery heard the comfortable rhythm of a grandfather clock. One part of his brain was violently alive though he felt tired and sleepy. Thorne, who looked utterly spent, seemed to be in as bad case. His eyes, fixed on the young giant's face, were glassy.

Ellery watched Keith silently. The jaw was massive, and it was the solid, masterful face that glowers from the football pages of newspapers. The hands, the premature lines about the mouth, the sun-charred skin! Another puzzling note! And he was very drunk.

"You damned porker," Keith said thickly, swaying a bit.

Dr. Reinach smiled, his little eyes wary. "Now, now, Nick," he said in a soothing rumble.

It all happened very quickly. Keith lurched forward and snatched the heavy cut-glass decanter from the taboret beside the fat man. He swung the decanter at the doctor's head. Thorne gasped and took an instinctive step forward, but he might have saved himself the trouble. Dr. Reinach jerked his head back with the rapidity of lightning and the blow missed. The violent effort pivoted Keith's body completely around. The decanter slipped out of his fingers and flew into the fireplace, crashing to pieces against the rear brick wall. The fragments splattered all over the fireplace, strewing its floor. The little brandy that remained in the bottle hissed into the fire, blazing up with a blue flame.

"That decanter," said Dr. Reinach angrily, "was almost a hundred and fifty years old!"

Keith stood still, his broad back to them. They could see his hands shaking.

"I think," sighed Ellery, struggling to his feet, "that I shall go to bed. Thank you for an altogether extraordinary evening, gentlemen. Coming, Thorne?"

Ellery opened his eyes after a tossing sleep, for a moment conscious only of the liquorish ache in his head and the fuzzy feel of his tongue. He did not remember where he was. Then, as he took in the faded wallpaper, the pallid patches of sunlight on the worn blue carpet, his trousers tumbled over the foot of the bed as he had left them the night before, memory came back, and, shivering, he consulted his wrist watch. It was five minutes to seven. He raised his head in the frosty air of the bedroom, his nose half frozen, and looked about.

And he heard Thorne's voice raised in a thin, cracked cry, almost a wail, coming from somewhere outside the house.

He was out of bed and at the window in one leap. But Thorne was not visible at this side of the house, upon which the woods encroached directly. He scrambled back to slip shoes over his bare feet, his coat over his pajamas, and hat on his tousled head, and was out in the corridor running for the stairs. The .38 was in his right hand.

"What's the matter?" grumbled someone, and he turned to see Dr. Reinach's vast skull protruding from the room next to his.

"Don't know. I heard Thorne cry out." Ellery pounded down the stairs and flung open the front door.

Thorne, fully dressed, was standing ten yards in front of the White House, facing Ellery obliquely, staring at something outside Ellery's range of vision with the most acute expression of terror on his gaunt cheeks Ellery had ever witnessed on a human face. Nick Keith was planted beside him, only partly dressed. The giant was glaring in the same direction.

"What's the matter?" growled Dr. Reinach from behind. "What's wrong?" He had pulled a raccoon coat over his nightshirt.

Thorne's Adam's apple bobbed nervously. The ground, the trees, the world were covered with snow of a peculiarly unreal nature. The air was saturated with warm woolen flakes, falling softly. Deep drifts curved upward to clamp the boles of trees.

"Don't move," cried the lawyer as Ellery and the fat man stirred. "Don't move! Stay where you are." He stumbled through the snow to the small porch, paler than his background. "Look at me," he gasped. "Look at me. Do I seem all right? Have I gone daft?"

"Pull yourself together, Thorne," said Ellery sharply. "What's happened? I don't see anything wrong."

"Nick!" bellowed Dr. Reinach. "Are you crazy, too?"

The young man covered his face with his hands for an instant, then he dropped his hands and looked again.

His voice was strangled. "Maybe we all are. This is— Have a look for yourself, smart guy."

They pushed past Thorne, who was trembling, and hurried toward Keith, straining their eyes.

They need not have strained. What was to be seen was plain for any eye to see. Ellery felt a crawling of his scalp as he looked and a vague conviction that this was inevitable, the only possible climax to a weird adventure. The world had turned topsy-turvy and nothing in it meant anything sane or reasonable.

A window rattled upon the second floor of the White House. It was Alice Mayhew, staring from the window of her bedroom, which was on the side of the house facing the driveway. A choking sound came from her. Then she, too, fell silent.

There was the house they had just come out of, the White House, with its front door quietly open and Alice Mayhew at an upper side window. Sub-

stantial, solid, an edifice of stone and wood and glass and the patina of age. It was everything a house should be. That much was real, a thing to be grasped at.

But there, beyond it, beyond the driveway, where the Black House had stood, the house in which Ellery himself had set foot only the afternoon before and explored from basement to roof; the house of the equally stone walls, wooden facings, glass windows, chimney, porch; the house of the blackened look and grinning gargoyles; the old Victorian house, built during the Civil War; the house which had survived Lincoln, the Ku Klux Klan, the Rough Riders, the Great War; the house where Sylvester Mayhew had died, where Thorne had barricaded himself for a week; the house which they had all seen, touched, smelled—there, *there stood nothing.*

No walls! No chimney! No roof! No ruins! No debris! No house! Simply nothing.

Nothing but empty space floored smoothly and warmly with snow.

The house had vanished during the night.

III.

"There's even," thought Mr. Ellery Queen dully, "a character named Alice."

He looked again. The only reason he did not rub his eyes was that it would have made him feel ridiculous. Besides, his sight had never been keener. And then the snow-hidden stones about had not moved, nor had the silent trees spoken. The world was still real. Was it the house that had been unreal? But that was impossible. He had stood within its walls, trod upon its littered floors, smelled its odors of neglect and stagnation. It had been as solid a house as a house can be.

And now it was gone, vanished, snuffed out—as if it had never been.

Their breaths wrote amazement on the crisp air, blowing back to envelop their heads in little clouds of steam. They simply stood there in the snow and looked and looked and looked at the empty space where the Black House had been.

"Why, it isn't there," said Alice feebly from the upper window. "It . . . it isn't there."

"Then I'm not insane." Thorne stumbled toward him. Ellery watched the old man's feet as they sloughed through the snow. Real enough, he thought—and wondered suddenly if he was not dreaming. There was a sharp yet blurred dream quality about everything this morning: the air, the single house cut off from its neighbor as if by a cleaver, the stupidly open mouths of everybody, the sense of being in a remote place light-years from anything human. "It *is* gone."

"Apparently." Ellery found his voice thick and slow. He watched the word curl out on the air and become nothing. "Apparently, Thorne." It was all he could find to say.

Dr. Reinach arched his neck, his wattles quivering like a gobbler's. "Incredible. Unscientific. It can't be. I'm a man of sense. My mind is clear. Things like that—damn it, they just don't happen!"

Thorne began wandering helplessly about in a circle. Alice stared unmoving from the upper window. And Keith cursed and began to run across the snow-covered driveway toward the invisible house, his hands outstretched before him like a blind man's.

"Hold on, Keith," said Ellery. "Hold on."

The giant halted, scowling. "What do *you* want?"

Ellery slipped his revolver back into his pocket and plowed through the snow. He paused beside Keith in the driveway. "I don't know precisely. Something's wrong. Something's out of kilter either with us or with the world. It isn't the world as we knew it. It's almost . . . almost a matter of transposed dimensions. I suppose I'm talking nonsense."

"You know best," said Keith angrily. "I'm not going to let this crazy business stampede *me*. There was a house on that plot last night, and nobody can convince me it still isn't there. Not even my own eyes. We've been hypnotized. I tell you it's there!"

Ellery sighed and dropped to his knees in the snow. He began to brush aside the white soft blanket with chilled palms. When he had laid the ground bare, he saw wet gravel and a rut.

"This *is* the driveway, isn't it?" he asked, without looking up.

Keith said balefully: "The driveway or the road to hell. You're as mixed up as we are. Why shouldn't it be?"

"I don't know." Ellery got to his feet. "I don't know anything. I'm beginning to learn all over again. It appears that something very strange happened last night."

"I tell you it's an optical illusion!"

"Something strange." The fat man stirred. "Yes, decidedly. The house has disappeared." He chuckled in a mirthless way.

"Oh, that," said Ellery impatiently. "Certainly. Certainly, doctor. That's a *fact*. As for you, Keith, you don't really believe this mass-hypnosis rot. The house is gone, right enough. It's not the fact itself that bothers me. It's the agency, the means. It smacks of . . . of—" He did not finish. "I've never believed in . . . in that sort of thing, damn it all."

"It's a trick," said Dr. Reinach. "A rotten trick, that's what it is. They can't fool *me!*"

Ellery looked at him. "Perhaps," he said, "Keith has it in his pocket."

Alice clattered out on the porch, her hair streaming, a coat flung over her night clothes. Behind her crept little Mrs. Reinach. The women's eyes were wild.

"Talk to them," said Ellery to Thorne. "Anything. Keep them occupied. We'll all go balmy

if we don't preserve at least an air of sanity. Keith, get me a broom."

He shuffled off up the driveway, skirting the invisible house very carefully and not once taking his eyes off the empty space. The fat man hesitated, then he lumbered along in Ellery's tracks. Thorne stumbled back to the porch and Keith stamped off, disappearing behind the White House.

There was no sun now. A pale and eerie light filtered down through cold clouds. The snow continued its soft thick fall. And the men and women were very small in the wilderness.

Ellery pulled open the folding doors of the garage and stared inside. A healthy odor of raw gasoline and rubber assailed his nostrils. Thorne's car stood within. Ellery knew it well, a black monster with glittering chrome work. Beside it stood the battered car in which Dr. Rienach had driven them from the city the previous day. Both cars were perfectly dry.

He shut the doors and turned back to the driveway. Aside from the oblong impressions of their feet, made a moment before, the snow covering the drive was virgin.

"Here's your broom," said the giant. "What are you going to do—ride it?"

"Hold your tongue, Nick!" said the fat man.

Ellery laughed. "Let him alone, doctor. His sanity is infectious. Come along, you two. This may be judgment day, but we may as well go through the motions."

They studied the white rectangle before them in respectful silence for some time. The flakes fell in a driving gentleness. There was nothing to stop them but the ground on which the men stood. And yet a house had been there only a few hours before.

"Strange," said Ellery. "Stranger than strange. You will observe that not the tiniest footprint, not the slightest impression of weight or substance or reality, mars this surface. It's just a coat of white paint plastered on the body of the earth where that excrescence was sheared off."

"What do you want with the broom?" growled Keith.

"It's hard to decide whether the snow was an accident or part of the plan," murmured Ellery. "Anything may be true today. Anything."

"Rubbish," said Dr. Reinach. "Abracadabra. *Om mani padme hum.* How could a man have planned a snowfall? You're talking gibberish."

"I didn't say a human plan, doctor."

"Rubbish, rubbish, rubbish!"

"You may as well save your breath. You're a badly scared little boy whistling in the dark—for all your size, doctor."

He gripped the broom tightly and stamped out upon the white rectangle. His muscles were gathered in, as if in truth he expected to encounter the adamant bulk of a house which was still there but unaccountably impalpable. When he felt nothing but air, he laughed a little self-consciously and began to wield the broom on the snow in a peculiar manner. He used the most delicate of sweeping motions, barely brushing the surface molecules away; so that layer by layer he reduced the depth of the snow. He scanned each layer with anxiety as it was uncovered. And he continued to do this until the ground itself lay revealed, and at no depth did he come across the least trace of a human imprint.

"Elves," he complained. "Nothing less than elves. It's beyond me."

"Even the foundation—" began Dr. Reinach heavily.

"Did this Black House of your brother's have a foundation?"

"I tell you it was built during the Civil War!"

Ellery poked the tip of the broom at the earth. It was hard as corundum.

The front door slammed as Thorne and the two women went into the White House. The three men outside stood still, doing nothing.

"Well," said Ellery at last, "this is either a bad dream or the end of the world." He made off diagonally across the plot, dragging the broom behind him like a tired charwoman, until he reached the invisible drive. And then he trudged down the drive toward the invisible road, disappearing around a bend under the stripped white-coated trees.

It was a short walk to the road. Ellery remembered it well. It had curved steadily in a long arc all the way from the turn-off at the Merrick highway. There had been no crossroad in all the jolting journey. He went out into the middle of the road, snow-covered now but plainly distinguishable between the powdered tangles of woods as a gleaming and empty strip. There was the long curve, exactly as he remembered it. Rather mechanically he used the broom again, sweeping a small space clear. And there were the pits and ruts.

"What are you looking for?" said Keith quietly. "Gold?"

Ellery straightened up by degrees, turning about slowly until he was face to face with the giant. "So you thought it necessary to follow me?"

The sun-charred features did not change expression. "You're as crazy as a bat. Follow you? I've got all I can do to follow myself."

Ellery grinned suddenly and slipped his arm into the crook of Keith's. "Do you know, Keith, you'd be a splendid companion on a ghost-smelling expedition. So bitterly sane. Is it that you've no imagination at all, or is life so terrible to you that you daren't think beyond it?"

"Let go of me!"

"Of course," said Ellery, "if you prefer it that way. I was thinking of your protection rather than my own. I've a revolver in my pocket, you see. Did I understand you to ask me if I was looking

for—gold, my dear young Prometheus?"

"You're a queer one," said Keith oddly as they made their way back toward the house.

"Gold! Hm-m-m! There was gold in that house, and now the house is gone. In the shock of the moment, I'd quite forgotten that. Thank you," said Ellery, "for reminding me."

"Mr. Queen," said Alice. She was crouched in a chair by the fire, white to the lips. "What has happened to us? What are we to do? Have we— Was yesterday a dream? I . . . I'm frightened."

"If it was," said Ellery, "then we may expect that tomorrow will bring a vision, for that's what holy Sanskrit says, and we may as well believe in parables as miracles." He sat down, rubbing his hands. "How about lighting a fire, Keith? It's cold in here."

"Sorry," said Keith with surprising amiability, and went away.

"We could use a vision," said Thorne. "My brain is—sick. It just isn't possible. I woke up this morning a little after six with an abominable head and I thought a tramp in the snow would make me feel better. When I went outside— Keith was there before me, gaping. I don't know how long we stood there. It was horrible." His hand slapped his side and something jangled.

"Keys," said Ellery, "and no house. It *is* staggering."

Keith stalked back under a load of firewood. He grimaced at the litter in the fireplace, dropped the wood, and began sweeping together the fragments of glass from the brandy decanter he had hurled against the brick wall the night before. Alice glanced from his broad back to the chromo of her mother on the mantel. As for Mrs. Reinach, she was as silent as a scared bird. She stood in a corner like a wizened little girl, her wrapper drawn about her, her stringy, sparrow-colored hair hanging down her back, and her glassy eyes fixed on the face of her husband.

"Milly," said the fat man.

"Yes, Herbert, I'm going," said Mrs. Reinach instantly, and crept up the stairs and out of sight.

"Well, Mr. Queen, what's the answer? Or is this a riddle too esoteric for your taste?"

Ellery scowled. "I suppose there's no way of reaching assistance?"

"Not unless you can fly."

"No phone," said Keith, without turning, "and you saw the road yourself. You'd never get a car through those drifts."

"If you *had* a car," prompted Dr. Reinach.

"What do you mean? In the garage—"

"Two useless products of the machine age. Both cars are out of fuel."

"And mine," said old Thorne suddenly, with a note of grimness, "has something wrong with it besides. I left my chauffeur in the city, you know, Queen, when I drove down the last time. Now I can't get the engine running on the little gas that's left in the tank."

Ellery's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair. "Bother! Now we can't even call on alien eyes to test whether we're bewitched or not. By the way, how far is the nearest community, doctor?"

"Over fifteen miles by road. Babylon. If you're thinking of footing it, Mr. Queen, you're welcome to the thought."

"You'd never get through the drifts," muttered Keith.

"And so we find ourselves snowbound," said Ellery, "in the middle of the fourth dimension. A pretty pass! Ah, there, Keith, that feels considerably better."

"I'm frozen," said Alice, drawing nearer the fire. "That's so kind of you, Mr. Keith."

The young man got to his feet and turned around. Their eyes met for an instant.

"It's nothing," he said shortly. "Nothing at all."

"You seem to be the only one who— Oh!"

A gigantic old woman with a black shawl about her shoulders was coming downstairs. She might have been years dead, so yellow and emaciated and mummified was she, were it not for the liveliness of her eyes and the extraordinary expression on her face. She was sidling down, feeling her way with one foot and clutching the banister with one dessicated claw, while her lively eyes remained fixed on Alice's face. There was a curious hunger in her expression, the flaring of a wild hope from the ashes of a dead one.

"Who . . . who—" began Alice, shrinking back in her chair.

"Don't be alarmed," said Dr. Reinach quickly. "It's unfortunate that she got away from Milly. Sarah!" In a twinkling he was at the staircase, barring the old woman's way. "What are you doing up at this hour? You should take better care of yourself."

She ignored him, continuing her snail's pace down the stairs until she reached his pachyderm bulk. "Olivia," she said in an unexpectedly pleasant voice, with a sort of disbelieving eagerness. "It's Olivia come back to me. Oh, my poor, sweet darling!"

"Now, Sarah," said the fat man, taking her hand gently. "Now, Sarah, don't excite yourself. This is Alice, Sarah—Alice Mayhew, Sylvester's girl, come from England. You remember Alice, little Alice? Not Olivia, Sarah."

"Not Olivia?" The old woman peered across the banister, her wrinkled lips moving. "Not Olivia?"

The girl jumped up. "I'm Alice, Aunt Sarah. Alice—"

Mrs. Fell darted suddenly past the fat man and scurried across the room to seize the girl's hand and glare down into her face. As she studied those shrinking features, her expression changed to one of hopeless disappointment. "Not Olivia. Olivia's

beautiful black hair. Not Olivia's voice. Alice? Alice?" She dropped into Alice's vacated chair, her skinny shoulders sagging, and began to weep. They could see the yellow skin of her scalp through the sparse gray hair.

Dr. Reinach roared, "Milly!" in an enraged voice.

Mrs. Reinach popped into sight like a jack-in-the-box.

"Why did you let her leave her room? Take her upstairs, Milly, at once!"

"Yes, Herbert," said the sparrow, and then she scurried downstairs in her wrapper and took the old woman's hand and, unopposed, led her away.

Mrs. Fell kept repeating, between sobs: "Why doesn't Olivia come back? They've taken her away from me."

"Sorry," said the fat man. "One of her spells. I knew it was coming on from the amazing curiosity she exhibited about you, Alice. There *is* a resemblance. You can hardly blame her."

"She . . . she's horrible," said Alice faintly. "Mr. Queen—Mr. Thorne—must we stay here? I'd feel so much . . . easier in the city. And then my cold, these frigid rooms."

"It's damnable!" burst out Thorne. "Dr. Reinach, you're deliberately frightening this child. By Heaven, I feel like chancing it on foot!"

"And leave Sylvester's gold to our tender mercies?" said the fat man.

"Sit down, everybody," drawled Ellery. "We shall be clawing at one another's throats in a moment. Thorne, be sensible. Our being snowbound can only be merest coincidence. Since there can be no duplicity in that direction, let's face the facts. We're marooned here in a sea of snow and we've an extraordinary problem to solve. It's hard on you, Miss Mayhew, but why not make the best of it?"

"I don't want father's fortune," said Alice desperately. "At this moment I don't want anything but to get away. Mr. Keith, couldn't you possibly—"

"I'm not a magician," said Keith rudely, and he buttoned his Mackinaw and strode out of the house.

They could see his tall figure stalking off through the snow behind a veil of flakes. Alice flushed and turned back to stare into the fire.

"Nor are any of us," said Ellery. "Enough of this chaffering. Thorne, tell me everything you know about the case, especially as it concerns Sylvester Mayhew's house. There may be a clue in your father's history, Miss Mayhew. If the house has vanished, so has the gold, and whether you want it or not, it's yours."

She nodded listlessly.

Thorne muttered: "Perhaps, Queen, you and I had better—"

"We made a frank start last night, Thorne. I see no reason why we shouldn't continue in the vein of refreshingly unorthodox candor. You needn't be reluctant to talk before Dr. Reinach. I've an idea our host is a man of unsuspected potentialities."

The fat man chuckled, his three chins buried in the collar of his raccoon coat. "You hear, Thorne? Mr. Queen, you honor me. More than that, you amuse me. If it weren't for that damned house vanishing—" His globular face darkened, and he tossed off a water goblet of gin.

IV.

Through air metallic with defiance, Thorne talked in a hard voice. Not once did he take his eyes off Dr. Reinach.

His first suspicion that something was wrong had come from Sylvester Mayhew himself. Thorne, hearing from Alice, learning her history—how her mother had divorced Mayhew two decades before, taking her infant back to England—had investigated and located Mayhew. He had explained to the old invalid his daughter's desire, now that her last maternal relative in England had died and she herself faced a lonely and impoverished existence, to find her father in the States, if he still lived. Old Mayhew, acting strangely, had acquiesced. He seemed to be living, explained Thorne in the same defiant way, in mortal fear of his own relatives in the neighboring house.

"Fear, Thorne?" The fat man raised his thin brows. "You know he was afraid, not of us, but of poverty. He was a miser."

Thorne paid him no attention. Mayhew had instructed him to write Alice and bid her come at once. He meant to leave his daughter his entire estate and he wanted her to have it before he died. The repository of the gold he had cunningly refused to divulge. It was "in the house," he had said, but he would not reveal its hiding place to anyone but Alice herself. The "others," he said cunningly, had been looking for it ever since their arrival.

"By the way," drawled Ellery, "how long have you people been living in this house, Dr. Reinach?"

"A year or so. You certainly don't put any trust in the paranoiac ravings of a dying man. There's no mystery about our living here. I looked Sylvester up over a year ago after a long interval and found him still in the old homestead, and this house, boarded up and empty, next door. The White House, incidentally, was built by my stepfather—Sylvester's father—on Sylvester's marriage to Alice's mother. Sylvester lived in it until father died, and then moved back to the Black House. I found Sylvester alone, a rotting hulk of what he'd been, living on crusts and badly in need of medical attention.

"The only way I could get his permission to move back to this house, which belonged to him, was by dangling the bait of free medical treat-

ment before his eyes. I'm sorry, Alice. He was quite insane. And so Milly and Sarah and I—Sarah had been living with us ever since Olivia's death—moved in here."

"Decent of you," said Ellery. "I suppose you had to give up your practice to do it?"

Dr. Reinach grinned. "I didn't have much of a practice to give up, Mr. Queen. I don't deny that the possibility of falling heir to some of Sylvester's fortune had crossed our minds. As it turned out—" His fat shoulders danced. "I'm a philosopher."

Thorne glared. "Don't deny," he shouted, "that when I came back here at the time Mayhew sank into his coma you people watched me like hawks! I was in your way. Oh, you didn't fool me. You wanted that gold. I shut myself up in that house just to keep you from getting your hands on it. You want candor. Here it is. I was in that house, Queen, for six days after the funeral and before Miss Mayhew's arrival, looking for the cache. I turned the house upside down, searched for secret panels, dug up the basement. And I didn't find the slightest trace of it. I tell you it isn't there. It was stolen before Mayhew died!"

"Now, now," sighed Ellery. "That makes less sense than the other. Why, then, has somebody intoned an incantation over the house and caused it to vanish?"

"I don't know," said the old man fiercely. "I know only that the most dastardly thing has happened here, that everything is unnatural, veiled in that . . . that creature's false smile! Miss Mayhew, I'm sorry I must speak this way about your own family. But it's my duty to warn you that you've fallen among wolves. Wolves!"

The fat man chuckled. "Admirable, Thorne."

"I wish," said Alice in a very low tone, "I were dead."

"That man Keith. What's he doing here? I suspect him, Queen."

"Apparently," said Ellery, "you suspect everybody."

"Mr. Keith?" Alice said. "Oh, I'm sure not. I . . . I don't think he's that sort, Mr. Thorne. He looks as if he's suffered terribly—as I have."

"Let us," said Ellery, "confine ourselves to the problem at hand. We were, I believe, considering the problem of a disappearing house. Do any architect's plans of the so-called Black House exist?"

"No."

"Who has lived in it since your father's death besides Sylvester Mayhew and his wife?"

"Wives," corrected Dr. Reinach, pouring another drink. "Sylvester married twice. I suppose you didn't know that, my dear." Alice shivered by the fire. "I dislike raking over old ashes, but since we're at confessional—Sylvester treated Alice's mother abominably. She was a woman of spirit and she rebelled. But when she'd got her divorce and returned to England, the reaction set in and she died very shortly afterward, I understand."

"When I was a baby," said Alice dully.

"Quite so. Sylvester, already mad—but not so anchoretic at that time—then wooed and won a wealthy widow and brought her out here to live. She had a son, a young boy by her first husband, with her. Father'd died by this time, and they lived in the Black House. It was soon evident that Sylvester had married the widow for her money. He persuaded her to sign it over to him—a considerable fortune for those days—and promptly proceeded to bedevil the life out of her. Result: the woman vanished one day, taking her boy with her. We never did find out what actually happened—whether Sylvester drove her off or, unable to stand his brutal treatment any longer, she left voluntarily. I discovered only accidentally, a few years later, through an obituary notice in a New York paper, that she'd died in poverty."

Alice was staring at him with a fine and nauseous horror. "Father—did that?"

"Oh, stop it," growled Thorne. "You'll have Miss Mayhew gibbering in another moment. What has all this to do with the house?"

"Mr. Queen asked," said the fat man mildly.

Ellery was staring absently into the flames.

"The real point," snapped Thorne, "is that you've watched me from the moment I set foot here, Reinach. Afraid to leave me alone for an instant. Why, you even had Keith meet me in your car in Babylon on both my visits—to 'escort' me here! And I hadn't an instant alone with the old gentleman until he lapsed into his coma and was unable to speak again before he died. Why? Heaven knows, I'm a forbearing man, but you've given me every ground for suspicion."

"Apparently," chuckled the fat man, "you don't agree with Caesar."

"Eh?"

"'Would,'" quoted the doctor, "'he were fatter.' Well, good people, the end of the world may have come, but that's no reason why we shouldn't have breakfast. Milly!" he bellowed.

Thorne awoke sluggishly, like a sleeping old hound dimly warned of danger. His bedroom was cold. A pale morning light was struggling in through the window. He groped under his pillow. "Stop where you are!" he said harshly.

"So you have a revolver, too?" murmured Ellery. He was dressed and he looked as if he had slept badly. "It's only I, Thorne, stealing in for a conference. It's not so hard, old boy, since your lock has gone the way of mine, Alice's, the Black House, and Sylvester Mayhew's blasted gold."

Thorne sat up, shivering. "Well?" He drew the patchwork comforter about him, his old lips blue.

Ellery lighted a cigarette, and for a moment stared out the window at the streamers of snow still falling from the sky. "This is a curious business all

around, Thorne. The queerest blend of spirit and matter. I've just reconnoitered. You'll be interested to learn that our young friend, the Colossus, is gone."

"Keith gone?"

"His bed hasn't been slept in at all. I looked."

"And he was away most of yesterday, too!"

"Precisely. Our surly Crichton, who seems afflicted by a particularly acute case of *Weltschmerz*, periodically vanishes. Where does he go? I'd give a good deal to know the answer to that question."

"He won't get far in those nasty drifts," mumbled the lawyer.

"It gives on, as they say, to think. Comrade Reinach is gone, too." Thorne stiffened. "Oh, yes, his bed's been slept in, but briefly, I should judge. Have they eloped together? Separately? Thorne," said Ellery thoughtfully, "this is a subtle devilment."

He looked at his wrist watch. It was a minute or so after seven. Thorne rasped his jaw for a moment. Then he said curtly: "Let's go downstairs."

"Excellent bacon, Mrs. Reinach," said Ellery. "I suppose it must be a trial carting supplies up here."

"We've the blood of pioneers," said Dr. Reinach cheerfully, before his wife could reply. He was engulfing mounds of scrambled eggs and bacon, a whale dining on plankton. "Luckily, we've enough in the larder to last out a considerable siege. Shan't starve."

Keith was not there. Old Mrs. Fell was. She ate voraciously, with the unconcealed greed of the very old. But all the time she contrived to keep her eyes on Alice, who had a haunted look about her.

"I didn't sleep very well," she said, toying with her coffee cup. Her voice was huskier. "Can't we manage somehow to get away?"

"Not so long as this snow keeps up, I'm afraid," said Ellery gently. "And you, doctor? How did you sleep? Or hasn't the whisking away of a whole house from under your nose affected your nerves any?"

The fat man's eyes were red-rimmed and his lids sagged. "I? I always sleep well. Nothing on my conscience, eh? Why?" The little eyes flashed briefly at Ellery.

"Idle question. Where's Keith?"

Mrs. Reinach swallowed a muffin. Her husband glanced at her and she fled to the kitchen. "Goodness knows. He's as unpredictable as the ghost of *Banquo*. Don't bother about the boy. He's harmless."

Ellery sighed. "The passage of twenty-four hours hasn't softened the wonder of the event. May I be excused? I'm going to have another peep at the house that isn't any more." Thorne started to rise. "No, no, Thorne—if you don't mind."

He got into his outer clothes and went outdoors. The drifts reached the lower windows now, and the trees had almost disappeared under the snow. A crude path had been hacked by someone from the door for a few feet. Already it was half refilled with snow.

He stood still in the path, breathing deeply of the raw air, staring off to the right at the empty rectangle. Leading across the expanse to the edge of the woods beyond were barely discernible tracks. He turned up his coat collar against the wind and plunged into the snow waist-deep.

It was difficult going, but not unpleasant. After a while he felt almost warm. When he had left the open area and struggled into the woods, it was with a sensation that he was leaving the world of reality behind. Everything was so white and still and beautiful, with a rare unearthly beauty. Occasionally, a clump of snow fell from a tree, pelting him.

Here, where there was a roof between ground and sky, the snow had not filtered into the mysterious tracks so quickly. They were purposeful tracks, unwandering, striking straight as a dotted line for some distant but tangible goal. He went on more rapidly, excited by a sudden presentiment of discovery.

Then the world went black. It was a curious thing. The snow got darker and darker, as if flooded from underneath by ink. And with some surprise he felt the cold wet kiss of the drift against his cheek.

He opened his eyes to find himself lying flat on his back in the snow and Thorne in the greatcoat stooped over him, nose jutting from blued face like a wintry thorn.

"Queen!" cried the old man, shaking him. "Are you all right?"

Ellery sat up, licking his lips. "As well as might be expected," he groaned. "What hit me? It felt like one of God's angrier thunderbolts." He caressed the back of his head tenderly and staggered to his feet. "Well, Thorne, we seem to have reached the border of the enchanted land."

"You're delirious," said the lawyer anxiously. "I was—"

Ellery looked about for the tracks which should have been there. But except for the double line at the head of which Thorne stood, there were none. He had lain there a long time.

"Farther than this," he said, "we may not go. Hands off. Nose out. Mind your own business. Beyond this invisible boundary lie Sheol and Domdaniel and Abaddon. *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate.* Forgive me, Thorne. Did you save my life?"

Thorne jerked about, searching the silent woods.

"I don't know. I think not. At least I found you lying here, alone. When you left the house Alice went upstairs, Reinach said something about a cat nap, and I wandered out of the house. I waded through the drifts on the road for a spell, and then I thought of you and made my way back. Your tracks were almost obliterated, but they were visible enough to take me to you here. By now they're gone. Good grief, Queen, it's open war now! Whoever it is—he'll stop at nothing."

"A benevolent war, at any rate. I was quite at his mercy, and he might have killed me as easily as—"

They froze. A sharp sound, like a pine knot snapping in a fire, or an icy twig breaking in two, but greatly magnified, had brought both men up tensely. Then the echo came at them, softer but unmistakable. It was the report of a gun.

"From the house!" yelled Ellery. "Come on, Thorne!"

Thorne paled as they scrambled through the drifts. "Gun. I forgot. I left my automatic under the pillow in my bedroom. Do you think—"

Ellery snatched at his own pocket. "Mine's still here. No, by George, I've been scotched!" His cold fingers fumbled with the cylinder. "Bullets taken out." He fell silent, his mouth hardening.

They found the women and Reinach running about like startled mice, searching for they knew not what.

"Did you hear it, too?" cried the fat man as they burst into the house. He seemed extraordinarily excited. "Someone fired a shot!"

"Where?" asked Ellery calmly, eyes on the rove. "Keith—"

"Don't know. Milly says it might have come from the rear. I was napping and couldn't tell. Revolvers! At least, he's come out in the open."

"Who has?" said Ellery coldly. "And in the flesh, eh?" Ellery went through to the kitchen and opened the back door.

The snow outside was smooth, untrodden. When he returned to the living room, Alice was adjusting a scarf about her neck with fingers that shook.

"I don't know how long you people intend to stay in this ghastly place," she said in a passionate voice, "but I've had quite enough, thank you. Mr. Thorne, I insist you take me away at once. I refuse to stay another instant!"

"Now, now, Miss Mayhew," said Thorne in a distressed way, taking her hands, "I should like nothing better. But can't you see—"

Ellery, on his way upstairs three steps at a time, heard no more. He made for Thorne's room and kicked the door open, sniffing. Then, with a rather grim smile, he went to the tumbled bed and pulled the pillow away. A snub-nosed automatic lay there. He removed the magazine. It was empty. Then he put the muzzle to his nose.

"Well," said Ellery, tossing the gun aside, "we're facing fact now, not fancy. It's war, as you said, Thorne. The shot came from your automatic. Barrel's still warm, muzzle still reeks, and you can smell the burnt gunpowder if you sniff this cold air hard enough. *And* the bullets are gone."

"But what does it mean?" cried Alice.

"It was a trick to get Thorne and me back to the house. I suppose the shot was a warning as well as a decoy."

Alice sank into a chair. "You mean we . . . we—"

"I mean," said Ellery, "that from now on we're prisoners, Miss Mayhew. Prisoners who may not stray beyond the confines of the jail. I wonder," he added, frowning, "precisely why."

Thorne stooped over him, nose jutting from blued face like a wintry thorn. "Queen!" he cried. "Are you all right?"

V.

The day passed in a timeless haze. The world outside became more and more choked in the folds of the snow, and the air was a solid white sheet. Without explanation, young Keith appeared at noon, gulped down some hot food, and leaden-eyed retired to his room. Dr. Reinach shambled about quietly for some time. Then he disappeared, to show up, wet and grimy, before dinner again. As the day wore on, less and less was said. From time to time one of them—Ellery, Thorne, the girl—went to a window and stared bleakly out at the snow-swirled space where no house stood. But for the most part they sat before the living-room fire in silence, gazing sightlessly at the flames.

They all retired early, without conversation.

At midnight the strain was more than even Ellery's iron nerves could bear. He had prowled about his bedroom for hours, poking at the brisk fire in the little grate, his mind leaping from improbability to sheer fantasy until his head throbbed with a great ache. Sleep was impossible. He wondered how the others were faring, Alice Mayhew in particular. The English girl was quickly becoming, he thought, a psychopathic problem. She had become almost hysterical during the day. Moved by an impulse which he did not attempt to analyze, he slipped into his coat and went out into the frosty corridor.

Thorne's door was closed. Ellery heard the old man's bed creaking and groaning. It was pitch-dark in the hall as he groped his way about. Suddenly his toe caught in a rent in the carpet and he staggered to regain his balance, coming up against the wall with a thud, his heels clattering on the bare planking at the foot of the baseboard.

He had no sooner straightened up than he heard the stifled exclamation of a woman. It came from across the corridor—from Alice's bedroom. It was such a weak, terrified cry that he sprang across the hall, fumbling in his pockets for a match as he did so. He found match and door in the same instant. He struck one and opened the other and stood still, the light flaring before him.

Alice was sitting up in bed, quilt drawn about her shoulders, her eyes gleaming in the light. Before an open drawer of a highboy across the room, one hand arrested in the act of scattering its contents about, loomed Dr. Reinach. His shoes were wet. His expression was blank, and his eyes were slits.

"Please stand still, doctor," said Ellery softly as the match sputtered out. "My revolver is useless as a percussion weapon, but it still can inflict damage as a bludgeon." He moved to a nearby table, where he had seen an oil lamp, struck another match, lighted the lamp, and stepped back again to stand against the door.

"Thank Heaven," whispered the girl.

"What happened, Miss Mayhew?"

"I . . . I don't know. I slept badly. I came awake a moment ago when I heard the floor creak. And then you dashed in—bless you!"

"You cried out."

"Did I?" She sighed like a tired child. "I . . . Uncle Herbert!" she cried suddenly, fiercely. "What were you doing—"

The fat man's eyes came open innocently. His hand withdrew from the drawer and closed it, and he shifted his elephantine body until he was standing erect. "Doing, my dear? Why, I came in to see if you were all right." His eyes were fixed on a patch of her white shoulder visible above the quilt. "You were so overwrought today. Purely an avuncular impulse, my dear child. Forgive me if I startled you."

"Perhaps I misjudged you," said Ellery. "That's not clever at all, Dr. Reinach. Downright clumsy, in fact. Miss Mayhew isn't normally to be found in the top drawer of a highboy, no matter how capacious. Did this fellow touch you?"

"Touch me?" Her shoulders twitched with repugnance. "No. If he had, I think I should have . . . have died."

"What a charming compliment." Dr. Reinach smiled.

"Then what," demanded Ellery, "*were* you looking for?"

The fat man turned until his right side was toward the door. "I'm notoriously hard of hearing," he said, "in my right ear. Good night, Alice. May I pass, Sir Launcelot?"

Ellery kept his eyes on the fat man's bland face until the door closed. For some time after the last echo of Dr. Reinach's chuckle died away, they were silent.

Then Alice slid down in bed like a little girl. "Mr. Queen, please. Please! Take me away tomorrow. I mean it, I truly do. I . . . I can't tell you how scared and alone I feel. Every time I think of . . . of that— How can such things be? We're not in a place of sanity, Mr. Queen. We'll all go mad if we remain here much longer. Won't you take me away?"

Ellery found himself sitting down on the edge of her bed. "Are you as upset as all that?" he asked gently.

"Terribly," she whispered. "Terribly."

"Then Thorne and I will do what we can tomorrow." He patted her arm through the quilt. "I'll have a look at his car and see if something can't be done with it. He said there's some gasoline left in the tank. We'll go as far as it will take us and walk the rest of the way."

"Do you think—he'll let us?"

"He?"

"Whoever it is that—"

Ellery rose with a smile. "We'll cross that bridge when it gets to us, Miss Mayhew. Meanwhile, get

some sleep. We'll have a strenuous day tomorrow."

"Do you think—"

"Leave the lamp burning and set a chair under the doorknob." He took a quick look out. "By the way, Miss Mayhew, is there anything in your possession which Dr. Reinach might want to appropriate?"

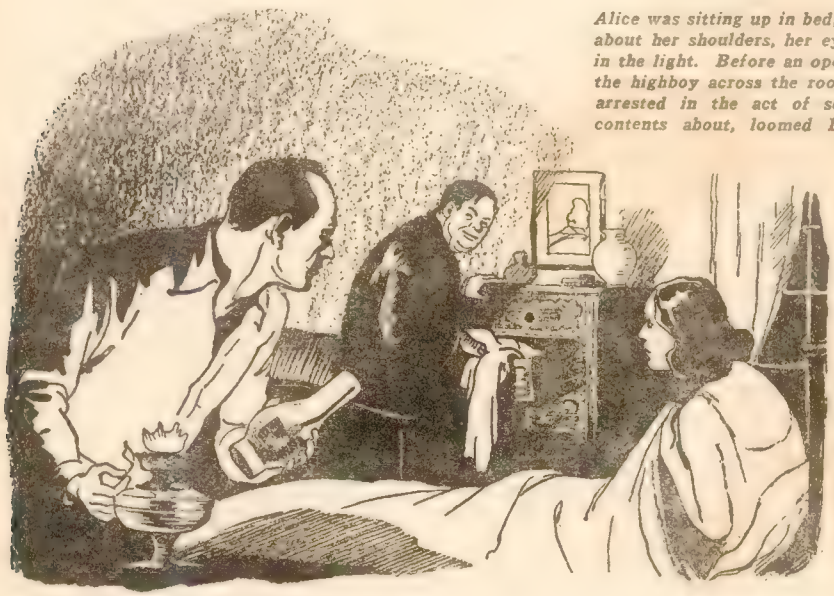
"It's puzzled me, too. I can't imagine what— I'm too poor, Mr. Queen—quite Cinderellaish. There's nothing—just the clothes and things I came with."

"No old records, letters, mementos?"

"Just one very old picture of mother."

"Hm-m-m! Well, good night. Don't forget the chair."

He waited in the frigid darkness of the corridor until he heard her creep out of bed and set a chair against the door. Then he went into his own room.



Alice was sitting up in bed, quilt drawn about her shoulders, her eyes gleaming in the light. Before an open drawer of the highboy across the room, one hand arrested in the act of scattering its contents about, loomed Dr. Reinach.

Thorne was there in a shabby dressing gown, looking like an ancient and disheveled specter of gloom.

"What ho! The ghost walks. Can't you sleep, either?"

"Sleep!" The old man sniffed. "How can an honest man sleep in this God-forsaken place? I notice you seem rather cheerful."

"Not cheerful. Alive." Ellery sat down and lighted a cigarette. "I heard you tossing about. Anything happen?"

"No. That's why I'm so jittery." Thorne jumped up and began to pace the floor. "Where have you been?"

Ellery told him. "Remarkable fellow, Reinach," he concluded. "But we mustn't allow our admiration to overpower us. We'll really have to give this thing up, Thorne—temporarily, at least. I was hoping— I've promised the young woman. We're leaving tomorrow as best we can."

"And be found frozen stiff next March by a rescue party? Pleasant prospect. My dear Queen, I must say I'm dreadfully disappointed in you. From what I'd heard about your professional cunning—"

"Don't rub it in. I detest the thought of giving up, myself. I dare say, Thorne, you haven't properly analyzed this problem. I gave it a lot of thought today. The goal eludes me, but I'm near it."

"You mean," gasped the old man, "you . . . you—"

"Remarkable case," said Ellery. "Oh, extraordinary! There isn't a word that describes it. If I were religiously inclined—" He puffed away thoughtfully. "It gets down to very simple elements. A fortune in gold exists. It is in a house. The house disappears. To find the gold, then, you must first find the house. I think I—"

"Aside from that mumbo-jumbo with Keith's broom," muttered Thorne, "I can't recall that you've made a single effort in that direction. Find the house! You've done nothing but sit around and wait."

"Exactly."

"What?"

"Wait. That's the prescription, my unsentimental friend. That's the vigil that will exorcise the spirit of the Black House. Wait. Exactly. Oh, how I'm waiting!"

Thorne hurled a rather angry glance at him.

Ellery was soberly smoking.

"Waiting. For what, man?" Thorne asked. "You're more exasperating than that fat monstrosity! What are you waiting for?"

Ellery looked at him. Then he rose and flung his butt into the dying fire and placed his hand on the old man's arm. "Please go to bed. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I began to say a moment ago that if I, poor sinner that I am, possessed religious tendencies, I should have become permanently devout in the past three days. I suppose I'm a hopeless case. But even I see a power not of earth in this."

"Play actor," growled Thorne. "Professing to see the hand of God in— Don't be sacrilegious, man."

Ellery looked out of his window at the moonless night and the glimmering grayness of a snow-covered world. "Hand? No, not hand, Thorne. If this case is ever solved it will be by—a lamp."

"Lamp?" said Thorne faintly. "Lamp?"

"In a manner of speaking—the lamp of God."

The next day dawned sullenly, as ashen and hopeless a morning as ever was. Incredibly, it still snowed in the same thick fashion, as if the whole sky were crumbling bit by bit.

Ellery spent the better part of the day in the garage, tinkering at the big black car's vitals. He left the doors open, so that anyone who wished might see what he was about. He knew little enough of automotive mechanics, and he felt from the start that it was a futile investigation. But in late afternoon, after hours of vain hunting, he suddenly came upon a tiny wire that seemed to him to be out of joint with its surroundings. It simply hung, a useless thing. Logic demanded a connection. He experimented. He found one.

As he stepped on the starter and heard the cold motor sputter into life, a shape darkened the entrance of the garage. He turned off the ignition and looked up. It was Keith, a black mass against the snow standing with widespread legs, a large can hanging from each hand.

"Hello, there," said Ellery grimly. "You've assumed human shape again, I see. Back on one of your infrequent jaunts to the world of man, Keith?"

Keith said quietly: "Going somewhere, Mr. Queen?"

"Oh, by all means. Why—do you intend to stop me?"

"Depends on where you're going."

"Thorne and I are taking Miss Mayhew back to New York."

"In that case, it's all right."

Ellery studied his face. It was worn deep with ruts of fatigue and worry.

Keith dropped the cans to the cement floor. "You can use these, then. Gas."

"Gas! Where on earth did you get it?"

"Let's say," said Keith steadily, "I found it. You've fixed Thorne's car, I see. Needn't have. I could have done it."

"And why," murmured Ellery, "didn't you?"

"Wasn't asked." The giant swung on his heel and vanished.

Ellery sat still for a long time. Then he got out of the car, picked up the cans, and poured their contents into the tank. He reached into the car again, got the engine running and, leaving it running, went back to the house.

He found Alice in her room, a coat over her shoulders, staring out her window. She sprang up at his knock.

"Mr. Queen, you've got Mr. Thorne's car going!"

"Success at last. Are you ready?"

"Ready? Heavens, yes. I feel so much better, now that we're actually leaving. Do you think we'll have a hard time? I saw Mr. Keith bring those cans in. Petrol, wasn't it? It was nice of him. I never did believe—" She flushed. There were hectic spots in her cheeks and her eyes were brighter than they had been for days.

"It may be hard going through the drift. I shouldn't anticipate, too—" Ellery stopped very suddenly, his eyes fixed on the worn carpet at his feet, stony yet startled.

"Whatever is the matter?"

"Matter?" Ellery raised his eyes and exhaled. "Nothing at all. God's in his heaven and all's right with the world."

She looked down at his feet. "Oh, the sun!" She turned swiftly to the window. "Why, Mr. Queen, it's stopped snowing. There's the sun setting—at last!"

"And high time, too," said Ellery. "Will you please get your things on? We leave at once." He picked up her bags and left her, walking with a springy vigor that shook the old boards.

The living room was filled with the babble of adieus. One would have said that this was a normal household, with normal people in a normal situation. Alice was almost gay. She set her purse down on the mantel next to her mother's chromo, fixed her hat, flung her arms about Mrs. Reinach with mute forgiveness, pecked gingerly at Mrs. Fell's withered cheek, and even smiled at Dr. Reinach. Then she dashed over to the mantel, snatched up her purse, ran back to link Thorne's arm in hers, threw one long enigmatic glance at Keith's bitter

face, and hurried outdoors as if the devil himself were after her.

Ellery followed more slowly. He climbed into the car, raced the motor, and then released the brake.

The fat man filled the doorway and shouted: "You know the road, now, don't you? Turn to the right at the end of this drive. Then keep on. You can't miss. You'll hit the Merrick Road—"

His last words were drowned in the roar of the engine. Ellery waved his hand. Alice, in the tonneau, twisted about and laughed out of sheer relief. Thorne sat quietly staring at the back of Ellery's head.

It was growing dark rapidly now. They made slow progress. The big car inched its way through the drifts, slipping and lurching, as night fell. Then Ellery turned the powerful headlights on. He drove with unswerving concentration. None of them spoke.

It seemed hours before they reached the Merrick highway. But when they did, the car leaped to life on the clearer road, and it was not long before they were entering Babylon. Here Ellery did a strange thing. He stopped the car at a traffic intersection and asked the officer something in a low voice. The officer stared at him and replied with gestures. Then Ellery swung the car off into another street. He drove slowly.

"What's the matter?" asked Alice, leaning forward.

"I've just thought of something."

He stopped the car at a large stone building and went inside, remaining there for fifteen minutes. He came out whistling.

"Queen, what's up?" demanded Thorne casually.

"Something that must be brought down." Ellery swung the car about and headed it for the traffic intersection. When he reached it, he turned left.

"Why, you've taken the wrong turn," said Alice nervously. "This is the direction from which we've just come. I'm sure of that."

"And you're quite right, Miss Mayhew. It is."

She sank back, suddenly pale, as if the very thought of returning terrified her.

"We're going back, you see."

"Oh, can't we just forget all those . . . those horrible people?"

"I've a viciously stubborn memory. Besides, we have reinforcements. If you'll look back, you'll see a car following us. It's a police car, and in it are the police chief of Babylon and a squad of picked men."

"But why, Queen? Why?"

"Because," said Ellery grimly, "I have my own professional pride. I've been on the receiving end of a magician's trick. Now I shall turn magician myself. You saw a house disappear." He laughed softly. "I shall make it appear again!" They could only stare at him, too bewildered to speak. "And then," said Ellery, "even if we overlooked such trivia as dematerialized houses, in all conscience we can't overlook—murder!"

VI.

And there was the Black House again. Not a wraith—a house, a solid house. It stood on the other side of the driveway, where it had always stood. They saw it even as they turned into the drive from the drift-covered road, its bulk looming black under the brilliant moon, as substantial a house as could be found in the world of men.

Thorne and the girl were incapable of speech. They could only gape, dumb witnesses of a miracle. As for Ellery, he stopped the car, sprang to the ground, signaled to the car pressing behind, and darted across the white clearing to the White House, whose windows were bright with light. Out of the police car men swarmed, and then ran after Ellery like hounds. Thorne and Alice followed in a daze.

Ellery kicked open the White House door. There was a revolver in his hand and there was no doubt, from the way he gripped it, that its cylinder had been replenished.

"Good evening again," he said, stalking into the living room. "Not a ghost. Inspector Queen's little boy in the flesh. Nemesis, perhaps. I bid you good evening. What—no greeting, Dr. Reinach?"

The fat man had stopped in the act of lifting a glass of liquor to his lips. It was curious how the color drained out of his pouchy cheeks, leaving them gray. Mrs. Reinach whimpered in a corner, and Mrs. Fell stared stupidly. Only Keith showed no surprise. He was standing by a window, muffled to the ears, and on his face there was bitterness and admiration and even, strangely, relief.

"Shut the door!" ordered Ellery.

The detectives spread out silently. Alice stumbled to a chair, her eyes distraught, studying Dr. Reinach with a fierce intensity. There was a sighing little sound, and one of the detectives lunged toward the window at which Nicholas Keith had been standing. But Nicholas Keith was no longer there. He was bounding through the snow toward the woods like a deer.

"Don't let him get away!" cried Ellery.

Three men dived through the window after the giant, their guns out. Firecracker noises began to sputter. The night outside was streaked with orange lightning.

Ellery went to the fire and warmed his hands. No one said anything. In the firelight his face was lean and worn, but eager, too, as if to his weariness had come a spiritual refreshment from some unexpected altitude. Then he turned about and put his hands behind him.

"I've told you, captain," he began, nodding to the stocky man in uniform at the door, "back at head-

quarters in Babylon enough of what has occurred since our arrival here to allow you an intelligent understanding of what I'm about to say.

"Reinach, last night for the first time in my career I acknowledged the assistance of— Well, I tell you, who are implicated in this crime, that, had it not been for God, you should have succeeded in your plot against Alice Mayhew's inheritance."

"I'm disappointed in you," said the fat man.

"A loss I keenly feel." Ellery stared at him impassively. "Let me show you. When Mr. Thorne, Miss Mayhew, and I arrived the other day, it was late afternoon. Upstairs, in the room assigned to me, I looked out the window and saw the sun setting. This was nothing and meant nothing—sunset. A trivial thing interesting only to poets and meteorologists. But this was one time when the sun was vital to a man seeking the truth—a lamp shining in the darkness.

"For, see: Miss Mayhew's bedroom that first day was on the opposite side of the house from mine. If the sun set in my window, then I faced west and she faced east. So far, good. We talked, we retired. In the morning I awoke at about seven—shortly after sunrise in this winter's month. And the sun was streaming into my window."

A knot hissed in the fire behind him. The stocky man in blue stirred uneasily.

"Don't you see?" cried Ellery. "The sun had *set* in my window, and now it was *rising* in my window!"

Dr. Reinach was regarding him with a mild ruefulness. The color had come back to his face.

Ellery said: "The significance of this unearthly reminder did not strike me at once. It slipped into and out of my consciousness, driven away by Thorne's cry of pure amazement outside. But much later, when I racked my brain, it came back to me, and I dimly saw that chance, cosmos, God, whatever you may choose to call it, had given me the instrument for understanding the colossal, the staggering phenomenon of a house which vanished overnight from the face of the earth. But I was not sure. I did not trust my memory. I needed another demonstration, a bulwark to bolster my own certainty. And so I waited for the sun to come again, hidden as it was by the snow clouds.

"When it came, there could no longer be any doubt. It came in Miss Mayhew's room, which had faced east the afternoon of our arrival. I saw the sun *set* in Miss Mayhew's room that evening, however. Then that room faced west last evening. How could her room face east one day and west another? How could my room face west one day and east another? Had the sun stood still? Or was there a possible explanation—one so extraordinarily simple that it staggered the imagination?"

Thorne said: "Queen, this is—"

"Please," said Ellery. "The only logical conclusion, the only conclusion that did not fly in the face of nature, of science, was that while the house we were in, the rooms we occupied, *seemed* to be identical with the house and rooms we had occupied on the day of our arrival, *they were not*. Unless this structure had been turned about on its foundation like a toy on a stick, which was palpably absurd, then *it was not the same house*. It looked the same inside and out, it had identical furniture, identical carpeting, identical decorations—but it was not the same house. It was another house exactly like the first in every detail except terrestrial position in relation to the sun."

A man shouted a message of failure outside—a shout carried away by the wind under the cold bright moon.

"See," said Ellery softly, "how everything fell into place? If this White House we were in was not the same house at all, but was a twin house in a different location, then the Black House had not vanished at all. It was where it had always been. It was not the Black House which had vanished, but *we*. It was not the Black House which had been moved away, but *we*.

"We had been transferred to another location where the surrounding woods looked similar, where there was a similar driveway with a similar ramshackle garage at its terminus, where the road outside was roughly the same, old and pitted, where everything was similar except that there was no Black House, only an empty clearing. We must have been moved to this duplicate White House, then, body and baggage, during the intervening night. We, Miss Mayhew's chromo, the holes in our door where locks had been, even the fragments of a brandy decanter which, the night before in a cleverly staged scene, had been shattered against the wall of the fireplace at the first house—to help further the illusion that we were still at that very house the next morning."

"Drivel," said Dr. Reinach, smiling. "Pure drivel."

"It was beautiful," said Ellery. "A beautiful plan. It had symmetry, the polish of conscious art. And it made a beautiful chain of reasoning, once I was started at the right link. For what followed? Since we had been transferred without our knowledge during the night, it must have been while we were unconscious. I recalled the two drinks Thorne and I had had, and the fuzzy tongue and head that resulted the next morning. Mildly, subtly drugged, then—and the drinks had been mixed by Dr. Reinach. Doctor—drugs! Very simple."

The fat man shrugged with amusement.

"But Dr. Reinach alone? Oh, no. One man could never have accomplished all that was necessary in the scant few hours available: Fix Thorne's car, carry us and our clothes and belongings from the White House to its duplicate—by machine—put Thorne's car out of commission again, put us to bed again, arrange our clothing identically, transfer the

chromo, the fragments of the cut-glass decanter in the fireplace, perhaps even a few knickknacks and ornaments not duplicated in the second White House, and so on.

"A Gargantuan job, even if most of the preparatory work had been done before our arrival. Obviously the work of a whole group, of accomplices. Who but everyone in the house? With the possible exception of Mrs. Fell, who in her condition could be swayed easily enough, with no clear consciousness of what was occurring."

Ellery sighed. "And so I accuse you all—including young Mr. Keith, who has wisely taken himself off—of having aided in the plot whereby you would prevent the rightful heiress of Sylvester Mayhew's fortune from taking possession of the house in which it was hidden."

Dr. Reinach coughed politely. "Certainly, captain," he said to the stocky man in blue, "you don't credit this fantastic story? I believe Mr. Queen has gone a little mad from shock."

"Unworthy of you, doctor," said Ellery. "The proof of what I say lies in the very fact that we are here, at this moment."

"You'll have to explain that," stated the police chief.

"I mean that we are now in the original White House. I led you back here, didn't I? And I can lead you to its twin, for now I know the basis of the illusion. After our departure this evening, incidentally, all these people returned to this house. The duplicate house had served its purpose and they no longer needed it.

"As for the trick, it struck me that this side road we're on makes a steady curve for miles. Both driveways lead off this same road, one some six miles farther on by road; although due to the curve, which is like a No. 9, the road makes a wide sweep and virtually doubles back on itself, so that the two settlements are only a couple of miles apart as the crow flies. When Dr. Reinach drove us out here the first day, he deliberately passed the almost imperceptible drive leading to the substitute house and went on until he reached this one, the original. We didn't notice the first driveway.

"Thorne's car was put out of commission deliberately to prevent his driving. The driver of a car will observe landmarks where his passengers will see little or nothing. Keith even met Thorne in Babylon on both Thorne's visits to Mayhew—to 'lead the way.' And it was Dr. Reinach who drove the three of us here the other day. They permitted me to drive tonight because we started from the substitute house—of the two, the one nearer to Babylon. We couldn't possibly pass the telltale second drive, then, and become suspicious."

"But, even granting all that, Mr. Queen," said the stocky man, "I don't see what these people expected to accomplish. You'll have to admit it's a tall story on the face of it. They couldn't expect to keep you people fooled forever. Sooner or later, one of you'd spot the trick, or get away and find the other house. Then their game would be up."

"True, but by that time these good folk," murmured Ellery, "expected that they would have laid hands on Mayhew's fortune and disappeared with it. Don't you see that the whole illusion was planned *to give them time*—time to dismantle the Black House, raze it to the ground if necessary, to find that hidden gold? I don't doubt that if you examine the house next door you'll find it already a hollow shell. That's why Reinach and young Keith kept disappearing.

"They were taking turns at the Black House picking it apart, stone by stone, in a frantic search for the cache, while we were occupied in the duplicate house with an apparently supernatural phenomenon. That's why someone—probably the worthy doctor here—slipped out of the house behind your back, Thorne, and struck me over the head when I rashly followed the tracks in the snow—to keep me from reaching the original settlement. For all I know, they've found Mayhew's money already."

"Oh, but we didn't," whimpered Mrs. Reinach, squirming in her chair. "Herbert, didn't I tell you that—"

"Idiot," said the fat man. "Stupid swine."

She jerked as if he had struck her.

"If you hadn't found the swag," said the stocky man quietly to Dr. Reinach, "why'd you let these people go tonight?"

Reinach lifted his glass and inspected its amber contents in the firelight.

"I think I can answer that," said Ellery in a gloomy tone. "It's directly tied up with Miss Mayhew."

"With me?" echoed Alice dazedly.

Ellery took off his pince-nez and looked at them. "When Alice Mayhew came here that first afternoon, she went into the Black House with us. In her father's bedroom she ran across an old chromo portraying her long-dead mother as a girl. Alice Mayhew fell on it like a war baby on a loaf of bread. She had only one picture of her mother, she said, and that a poor one. She treasured this unexpected discovery so much that she took it with her at once to the White House, remarking that the finding of it repaid her for the whole journey from England. And she placed it on the mantel over the fireplace here in a prominent position."

The stocky man looked puzzled. Alice sat very still. And Ellery put the pince-nez back on his nose and said: "Yet when Alice Mayhew fled from the White House in our company tonight for what seemed to be the last time, apparently overjoyed at the prospect of leaving it forever behind, she completely overlooked her mother's chromo, that treasured memento. She could not have failed to overlook it in, let us say, the excitement of the moment.

She had put her purse on the mantel a minute before, very near the chromo. She went back to the mantel and recovered her purse. The chromo, she passed by without a glance. Since its sentimental value to her was overwhelming, it's the one thing she wouldn't have left. If she had taken it in the beginning, she would have taken it on leaving."

Thorne stirred. "What in the name of Heaven," he almost shrieked, "are you saying, Queen? It's . . . it's—" His eyes blazed at the girl, who sat glued to her chair, scarcely breathing.

"I am saying," said Ellery curtly, "that we were blind. I am saying that not only was a house impersonated, but a woman as well. I am saying that this woman is not Alice Mayhew."

The girl raised her eyes. "I thought of everything," she said with the queerest sigh, "but that. It was going so beautifully."

"Oh, you fooled me very properly," snapped Ellery. "How you must have laughed at my gullibility! That pretty little scene enacted in your bedroom last night. I know now what happened. This precious Dr. Reinach of yours had stolen into your room to report on the search at the Black House, perhaps to urge you to get Thorne and me away today at any cost. I happened along in the hall outside, stumbled, and fell against the wall with a clatter. You instantly fell into that cunning deception. Actors! Both of you missed a career on the stage."

The fat man and the girl remained silent.

"You were devils, the lot of you. Psychologically this plot has been the conception of genius. You knew that Alice Mayhew was unknown to Thorne and me except by the photographs she had sent from England. You knew that she would be with us in the flesh only for a few hours, and then chiefly in the dark tonneau of a car where we wouldn't be able to observe her features very clearly. Alice Mayhew walked into this house and was whisked upstairs by Mrs. Reinach. And Alice Mayhew never appeared before us again.

"It was you who came down—you, who had been secreted from Thorne's eyes during the past few weeks deliberately, so that he would not even suspect your existence; you, who probably conceived the entire plot when Thorne brought the photos and letters; you, who looked enough like the real Alice Mayhew to get by with an impersonation in the eyes of two strangers. I did think you looked different, somehow, when you appeared for dinner that night, but I put it down to the fact that I was seeing you without your coat and hat on.

"Naturally, after that, the more I saw you the more I was unconsciously convinced you were Alice Mayhew. You came down speaking in a husky voice, saying you had caught cold—a clever ruse to conceal a possible difference in voice. The only danger that existed was in Mrs. Fell, who gave us the answer the first time we met her. She thought you were her own daughter Olivia. Of course—because that's who you are!"

Dr. Reinach sipped his brandy absently. Old Mrs. Fell was gaping at the girl.

"You even covered that danger by having Dr. Reinach tell us beforehand that trumped-up story of Mrs. Fell's 'delusion' and Olivia Fell's 'death' several years ago. Oh, admirable! Yet even she, in the poor frailty of her anile faculties, was fooled by a difference in voice and hair—two of the most easily disguisable features. I could find myself moved to admiration if it were not for one thing."

"What do you mean?" asked Olivia Fell coolly, meeting his eyes.

Ellery went quietly to her and gripped her shoulder. "Alice Mayhew vanished, and you took her place. Why did you take her place? For two possible reasons. One—to get Thorne and me away from the danger zone as quickly as possible, and to keep us away by 'abandoning' the fortune or dismissing us; in proof, your continuous insistence that we take you away. Two—of infinitely greater importance: if you did not find the gold at once, you were still Alice Mayhew in our eyes. You could then dispose of the house as you saw fit. Whenever the gold was found, it was yours and your accomplices'.

"But the real Alice Mayhew vanished. For you, her impersonator, to be in a position to go through the long process of taking over Alice Mayhew's inheritance, it was necessary that Alice Mayhew remain invisible. For you to get possession of her inheritance and live to enjoy it, it was necessary that Alice Mayhew remain invisible forever. And that, Thorne," said Ellery grimly, "is why I said that there was something besides a disappearing house to cope with tonight. Alice Mayhew was murdered."

There were three shouts from outside in which were held a note of excitement. They were cut off very abruptly.

"Murdered by the only occupant of the house who was not *in* the house when this impostor came downstairs that first evening—Nick Keith. A hired killer, no doubt."

A voice said from the window: "Not a hired killer."

They all wheeled sharply and fell silent. The three detectives who had sprung out of the window were there, in the background, quietly watchful. Before them were two people.

"Not a killer," said the woman. "That's what he was supposed to be. Instead, he saved my life. Dear Nick."

And now the pall of grayness settled over the faces of Mrs. Fell, and Olivia Fell, and the doctor, and the doctor's wife—for by Keith's side stood Alice Mayhew. She was the same woman who sat inside the house only in general similitude of feature. Now that they could be compared, there were

obvious points of difference. She looked worn and grim, but rather happily so, and she was holding to the arm of bitter-mouthed Nick Keith with a grip that was quite possessive.

Afterward, when it was possible to look back on the whole daring, improbable, amazing plot, and when all the fine Machiavellian details were known, Mr. Ellery Queen said: "It would have been utterly impossible except for two things: the character of Olivia Fell and the—in itself—fantastic existence of the duplicate house."

He might have added that both of these would have been impossible except for the aberrant strain in the Mayhew blood. The father of Sylvester Mayhew—Dr. Reinach's stepfather—had always been erratic, and he had communicated his mental unbalance to his children. Sylvester and Sarah, twins, had always been insanely jealous of each other's prerogatives. When they married in the same month, their father avoided trouble by presenting them with two specially built houses identical in every detail, down to the last knicknack on the living-room mantel.

One, he put up next to his own house and gave to Mrs. Fell. The other, he built on a piece of property he owned some miles away and gave to Sylvester. Mrs. Fell's husband died early in her married life, and she moved away to live with her half brother Herbert. When old Mayhew died, Sylvester boarded up his own house and moved into the ancestral mansion. And there the twin houses stood for many years, separated by a few miles, and completely identically furnished inside—fantastic monuments to the Mayhew insanity.

The duplicate White House lying there, boarded up, waiting, needed only the evil genius of an Olivia Fell to be put to use. Olivia was beautiful, intelligent, accomplished, and as unscrupulous as *Lady Macbeth*. It was she who had influenced the others to move back to the abandoned house next to the Black House with the sole purpose of coercing or robbing Sylvester Mayhew. When Thorne appeared with the news of Sylvester's long-lost daughter, she recognized the peril to their scheme and, grasping her own resemblance to the photographs Thorne brought of her English cousin, conceived the whole extraordinary plot.

She could not prevent Alice Mayhew from coming to the Black House to claim her inheritance. The girl might be killed, but Thorne was an obstacle. For while Alice Mayhew, an unknown, without relatives abroad, might disappear without repercussions, a man of Thorne's position could not. They dared not harm him. Yet they must nip the English girl's visit in the bud, prevent Sylvester from telling her—and Thorne—where the gold was hidden. Obviously, the first step was to put Sylvester out of the way. With perfect logic, then, she bent Dr. Reinach to her will and caused him to murder his patient before the arrival of Sylvester's daughter. A later exhumation revealed traces of poison in the body. Meanwhile, Olivia planned the impersonation and illusion.

Alice was to be murdered as soon after her arrival as possible in order that the impersonation be given opportunity of success. The house illusion was planned for the benefit of Thorne, to keep him squestered and bewildered while the Black House was torn down in the search for the cache of gold. The illusion would perhaps not have been necessary had Olivia felt certain that her impersonation would go undetected. But there was always the imminent possibility that in a few days she might be unmasked. In those few days, at least, then, she meant to give herself the opportunity of stripping the Black House down to its foundation, if necessary, to find the gold. The illusion was the safest possible means to this end. Ellery's presence was unexpected and unpleasant, but she felt that what applied to Thorne applied to him as well, and nothing short of a cataclysm could have stopped her.

The illusion was simpler, of course, than appeared on the surface. The house was there, completely furnished, quite ready. All that was necessary was to take the boards down, air the place out, put fresh linen in, and clean up. There was plenty of time before Alice's arrival for this preparatory work.

The one weakness of Olivia Fell's plot was objective rather than personal. She selected Nick Keith for the job of murdering Alice Mayhew. Keith had originally insinuated himself into the circle of plotters, posing as a desperado ready to do anything for pay. Actually, he was the son of Sylvester Mayhew's second wife, who had been so brutally treated by Mayhew and driven off to die in poverty.

Before his mother died, she instilled in Keith's mind a hatred for Mayhew that waxed, rather than waned, with the years. Keith's sole motive in joining the conspirators was to find his stepfather's fortune and take that part of it which Mayhew had stolen from his mother. He had never intended to murder Alice—his ostensible role. When he carried her from the house under Thorne's and Ellery's noses, it was not to strangle and bury her, as Olivia had directed, but to secrete her in an ancient shack known only to himself in the nearby woods. He had managed to smuggle provisions to her while he was ransacking the Black House.

At first he had held her frankly prisoner, intending to keep her so until he found the money, took his share, and escaped. But as he grew to know her, he came to love her, and he soon confessed the whole story. Her instant sympathy gave him courage. Concerned now with her safety above everything else, he prevailed upon her to remain in hiding until he could find the money and outwit his fellow con-

spirators. Then they both intended to unmask Olivia.

The ironical part of the whole affair, as Mr. Ellery Queen was to point out, was that the goal of all this plotting and counterplotting—Sylvester Mayhew's gold—remained as invisible as the Black House had apparently been. Despite the most thorough search of the building and grounds, no trace of it had been found.

"I've asked you to visit my poor castle," said Ellery with a smile a few weeks later, "because something occurred to me that simply cried out for investigation."

"I'm glad something occurred to somebody," said Keith with a grin. "I'm a pauper, and Alice is only one jump ahead of me."

"You haven't the philosophic attitude toward money, apparently, that is held by the worthy Dr. Reinach," said Ellery. He poked a log in the fire with his feet. "I wonder how he likes our jails. By this time, Miss Mayhew, our mutual friend Thorne has had your father's house virtually annihilated. No gold. Eh, Thorne?"

"Nothing but dirt," said the lawyer sadly. "Why, they've taken that house apart stone by stone."

"Exactly. Now there are two possibilities, since I am incorrigibly categorical: your father's fortune exists, Miss Mayhew, or it does not. If the latter is the case and he was lying, there's an end to the business, of course, and you and your precious Keith will have to put your heads together and agree to live in noble poverty. But suppose we put our faith in your father's essential veracity. Suppose there was a fortune, and he did secrete it somewhere in that house. What then?"

"Then," sighed Alice, "it's flown away."

Ellery laughed. "Not quite. We've had enough of vanishments for the present, anyway. Let's tackle it this way. Is there anything which was in Sylvester Mayhew's house before he died which is not there now?"

Thorne started. "If you mean the . . . er . . . body—"

"Don't be gruesome. There's been an autopsy, anyway. Guess again."

Alice looked slowly down at the package in her lap. "So that's why," she said, "you asked me to fetch this with me today."

"You mean," cried young Keith, "the old fellow was deliberately putting everybody off the track when he said his fortune was 'gold'?"

Ellery chuckled and took the package from the girl. He unwrapped it and for a moment gazed appreciatively at the old chromo of Alice's mother. And then he stripped away the back of the frame.

Gold-and-green documents cascaded into his lap.

"Converted into bonds," said Ellery. "Who said your father was cracked, Miss Mayhew? A clever gentleman. Come, Thorne, leave these children of fortune alone!"

THE END.

THE Murder Gun

by FRANK GRUBER

It had blazed a path of death in the days of Western pioneers; now it was on its murderous way again—this time on swanky Park Avenue!

It was nice work. The trouble, Sam Vedder thought, was that it didn't come often enough; so now that he was engaged in it, he was willing to stretch it out a little longer.

Specifically, the work consisted of having lunch in the Club 66, with a blonde who could have given two thirds of the Hollywood blondes a two-furlong start and beaten them without a photo finish.

And Sam Vedder was getting paid for it. In hard cash, not to mention the bonus of a swell lunch and five cocktails on the old expense account.

But all good things come to an end and the blonde finally said to Vedder, "He just came in. He's going to that little table in the corner."

Vedder turned leisurely and looked toward the corner table. Adam Lord looked like the popular conception of a blackmailer who preyed on women. He was about forty, slender, with a thin black mustache and oily black hair. He *was* a blackmailer, which just goes to show that people are sometimes right.

Vedder turned back to blond Evelyn Walker. He didn't even mind that there was a Mrs. before her name. He said: "So I slip him your cigarette case, in which there's five thousand dollars, and he gives me a package of letters?"

"One letter," Evelyn Walker corrected. "And then you get back the cigarette case—if you can. Your agency's fee comes out of it."

Vedder nodded. "I only hope he hangs on to the cigarette case. I'd like to smack him—just once!"

He pushed back his chair, picked up the cigarette case that lay on the table and, smiling at Evelyn Walker, got to his feet.

He walked to the table in the corner and, sitting down opposite the sleek-haired man, said: "Hi, Adam!"

He laid the cigarette case on the table so the initials, E. W., were upward.

Adam Lord looked at the cigarette case, then lifted his eyes to Vedder's face. "Hello," he said. "How's everything?"

"Fine," Vedder replied. "Just fine. And how're things in your line?"

Adam Lord took an envelope from his inside breast pocket and slipped it across the table. With the same hand, he took the cigarette case. But he dropped it again, as Vedder's clenched fist rapped his knuckles sharply. Vedder made a swooping movement and gathered in both the cigarette case and the letter. He shifted them to his left hand and grinned wickedly at Adam Lord.

Adam Lord's black eyes glittered. "You can't get away with that," he said, savagely.

"I *have* got away with it," Vedder said.

Adam Lord made a swift lunge across the table, but Vedder, expecting the movement, jammed the table against the blackmailer so viciously that Lord's chair went over backward, and he crashed to the floor.

Vedder got up from his own chair, slipped the retrieved cigarette case and letter into a pocket and waited for Lord to get up.

The incident had already attracted the attention of the diners and club attendants. Two or three of the latter were hurrying forward, and Vedder, watching them out of the tail of his eye, hoped they wouldn't get to him too quickly. He still hadn't poked Adam Lord in the face.

That chance was coming.

Adam Lord, his face contorted with rage, was scrambling to his feet. He cried, "You dirty hoodlum!" and swung his right fist at Vedder's head.

Vedder, contemptuous of the slighter-built blackmailer, ducked the blow and began countering with his right. It never landed on Lord, for Lord's own blow had been a feint to catch Vedder off guard. It succeeded admirably, due mainly to Vedder's contempt of his opponent.

And now Adam Lord's left connected with Vedder's jaw. Vedder, totally unprepared for anything like it, reeled back and crashed into a table behind him. He upset it and, tripping on a chair, hit the floor.

For a moment he lay stunned, but then he shook his head and began getting to his feet. A couple of brawny waiters helped him, and when they got him up, kept hold of him.

"Let me go!" Vedder snarled.

"Easy, sir," one of the waiters said, politely, while he retained a firm grip on Vedder. "What you need is a bit of air, sir. You'll feel better and— Right this way, sir!"

They were still courteous and apologetic when they deposited Sam Vedder on the sidewalk. They popped back into the Club 66, leaving the door guarded by a grinning Negro, who was six inches taller than Joe Louis.

Vedder looked at the giant doorman and shook his head, sadly. "I guess they wanted me to leave."

"Yassuh," the doorman agreed.

Vedder walked to the curb and, leaning against an electric-light post, watched the door of the Club 66 for several minutes. During that time half a dozen people came out, but Adam Lord and Evelyn Walker were not among the number. Vedder finally shrugged and signaled a taxi.

Ten minutes later he entered a building on Madison Avenue. He rode in the elevator to the tenth floor and went to a door on which there was stenciled:

BLIGH DETECTIVE AGENCY
We Always Get Our Man

He pushed open the door and said brightly to a redhead seated behind a stenographer's desk:

"Hi, sugar! Chalk up one more for the Bligh Detective Agency."

Emma Todd, as a working girl, lacked the time and money to be as smartly groomed and beautiful as Mrs. Evelyn Walker, but that alone prevented her from outsparkling the rich victim of Adam Lord's blackmailing. Sam Vedder was keenly aware of Emma Todd's attractiveness and would have made much more of it than he did—if Emma had not constantly beat off his sallies.

She said, now, in a tart voice: "I don't believe it. You must have messed up the assignment, somehow. You always have, even the simple ones like taking a Park Avenue hussy to lunch."

"Ah, my pet, what long claws you have!" Vedder chided her. "I play no favorites. I'll take you to dinner tonight."

"To the Club 66?"

Vedder winced. "This is pleasure, not business. I can't put pleasure on the expense account."

"Then," said Emma coldly, "I can eat hamburger steak in my own apartment—alone."

Vedder gave her a dark look and continued on to a door on which was the name:

CAPTAIN BLIGH

He opened the door before Captain Billy Bligh could put away his racing form. The captain was fifty-odd, had almost white hair, and the face of a cherub. But anyone who had dealings with him on that assumption soon received a rude awakening.

He beamed at Sam Vedder: "Did you finish that little job, Sam?"

Vedder smacked his lips. "It was simple. Even Bobcat could have handled it. Here's the boodle." He pulled out the cigarette case and the envelope he had taken from Adam Lord. He dropped both objects on the desk before Captain Bligh.

Bligh pounced on the cigarette case. He opened it and took a sheaf of crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. He riffled through them quickly, then nodded in satisfaction.

"That's fine, Sam, my boy. We earned a nice fee on this. Have any trouble with that gigolo?"

"Nah, he got nasty when I grabbed the money back; so I poked him one. That was all there was to it. Except"—Vedder swallowed—"I saved the agency a little on the expense account. They threw me out before I could pay the lunch check."

The admission cost Vedder something, for he had counted on retaining that money, but convincing the captain of his shrewdness was worth it. He hadn't been in such good standing with the boss lately.

Bligh nodded approvingly and picked up the envelope. He frowned when he saw that it was sealed. Vedder grinned at him. He'd wanted to read the letter, himself. It must have been a good one to be worth five thousand dollars to Evelyn Walker.

The phone on Bligh's desk whirred and he scooped up the receiver. He said: "Put her on," then beamed: "Yes, Mrs. Walker, he's just returned. Yes. . . ." His face remained smiling and he nodded pleasantly. "Of course," he went on. "Yes, certainly. Yes. . . . Good-by, Mrs. Walker."

He hung up the receiver, gave Vedder the benefit of a fond look, then picked up a letter opener from his desk. He slit open Mrs. Walker's retrieved envelope with a single motion and extracted a folded sheet of paper.

He handed it across the desk to Sam Vedder. "Read it, Sam, my boy."

Vedder unfolded the sheet of paper and gulped. "It's blank!" he cried.

"Is it, Sam? Well, well—" That was as far as Captain Bligh could go. He got off the joy wagon, and his first roar rattled the windows. The scathing denunciation of Sam Vedder that followed raised the temperature of the room to the point where the wallpaper began to curl from the heat. Captain Bligh knew all the words and he used them. When he finished, he started in on the Spanish words he had picked up on a trip to South America five years ago.

He stopped finally. He had to, for he simply wore himself out. And by that time Sam Vedder had shrunk so much that his suit seemed six sizes too large for him. When he had entered the room, it had been a tight fit.

Captain Bligh pointed a trembling finger at him. "So you bopped him before you made sure you had the right letter. You grabbed the money back, and then they threw you out. You saved the lunch check—and cost this agency twenty-five hundred dollars!"

"I'll get the letter," Vedder cut in weakly. "No gigolo can make a monkey of me."

"Yes," said Captain Bligh, "you'll get the letter. Before tomorrow morning. And you'll get it without this five thousand dollars. 'Cause why? 'Cause he's raised the price to ten thousand, now, and Mrs. Walker can't get the money without asking her husband for it. If he knew about this letter, she wouldn't be needing to pay any blackmail. So go ahead, now, get the letter from Lord. And if you fail—why, that's O. K., too. Only just don't come around here any more. That's all. You—"

Sam Vedder made a desperate plunge for the door and escaped. In the outer office he shot one look at Emma Todd's strained, white face and kept going. He didn't relax until he stepped out of the elevator on the ground floor.

II.

Vedder looked at his watch, then, and saw that it was two forty-five.

He went toward a public telephone booth beside the cigar counter and rummaged through a worn telephone directory. There was a half column of Lords in the book, but not one had the initial "A" in connection with it.

He groaned and let the book down. Adam Lord was just the type to have an unlisted telephone. But how was Vedder to get the number—and Lord's address—from the operator?

He rubbed his chin for a moment, then entered the telephone booth. He dialed the operator and, when he got her, said crisply:

"This is Western Union. We have an important telegram for a Mr. Adam Lord, who formerly lived on East Sixty-eighth Street, which we are unable to deliver. We believe he has an unlisted telephone, and we'd appreciate very much if you'd call him for us."

"Just a moment, please!"

Vedder heard a phone ring repeatedly and then the operator's voice again: "Sorry, but Mr. Lord does not answer."

"Well, how are we going to get his telegram to him?" Vedder asked. "We gather from the text that it's extremely important."

"Call the Plaza operator and have her try to get Mr. Lord at intervals."

"Thank you," Vedder said.

He hung up the receiver and scowled at the telephone. Well, he'd narrowed it down to the Plaza exchange, which told him that Adam Lord lived within a certain area. But now to narrow it down some more—

He riffled through the telephone directory again, looked up Western Union, and found the address of one of the branches which had a Plaza telephone number.

It wasn't too far away, and Vedder took an uptown bus. A few minutes later he got out of the bus and strolled back a half block to the telegraph office. He started to enter the place, then drew back from the door and went instead to a flower shop next door. A blackmailer who preyed on foolish women should be a steady flower buyer. Flowers are always used in the early stages.

Vedder said to the florist: "A friend of mine's just coming out of the hospital, and I want to send him some flowers. But I've mislaid his address. He lives nearby, and it occurred to me that you might know him. Mr. Adam Lord?"

The florist brightened. "Of course! One of our very best customers. What did you wish to send him?"

"How much are your roses?"

"We have some nice long-stemmed tea roses at a dollar and a half a dozen, and some gorgeous red roses at two dollars. Just take a look at them. Right here—"

"They're fine," Vedder said. "Fix up a dozen—no, two dozen. And send them right over, will you?"

"Of course. You wish to inclose a card?"

Vedder nodded and went to a desk. He sat down and wrote on a card: "Benny." Then he paid for the roses and left the store. He went across the street and leaned against an electric pole. Five minutes later a man, carrying a long box, came out of the florist's and started briskly up the street. Vedder followed him up Madison, to Fifty-third Street, then eastward for more than three blocks. There, the florist's delivery man turned into a renovated four-story brownstone building.

Vedder waited across the street. After two or three minutes the delivery man came out of the building. But he was still carrying the flowers. Apparently Adam Lord was not at home, nor was there anyone in his apartment to receive the flowers.

A gleam came into Vedder's eyes and he crossed the street. In the vestibule was a series of four mailboxes, which indicated that there were only four apartments in the building, one to a floor. The name A. Lord was listed for the second floor.

Vedder tried the inner door and found it locked. He pressed the pearl button under the top mailbox and waited. Nothing happened. He tried the third button from the top, and after a moment the door-lock-release buzzer whirred. He opened the inner door quickly and stepped inside. Straight ahead was a flight of stairs, and to the right a corridor led to the rear of the building.

Vedder waited in the corridor for two or three minutes, then began tiptoeing up the stairs. On the second floor, there were two doors—one near the front and the other in back. Beside the rear door, and almost even with the floor, was a tiny foot-square door, which the milkman was supposed to use.

Vedder took a ring of keys from his pocket, examined the lock of the rear door, and finally tried one of the keys. It worked, and again he thanked the locksmith who had once furnished him with this set of skeleton keys, guaranteed to open almost every conceivable type of lock.

He slipped cautiously into a white-tiled kitchen and from there into a short hall leading to the front of the apartment. He looked into an effeminately furnished bedroom, then proceeded to the living room in front. The door opening from the hall was partly ajar, and he listened for a moment. Although he was almost certain that Adam Lord was not at home, he was so tensed by his illegal entry into the apartment that the creaking from the bedroom behind him caused him to gasp. He whirled swiftly and stared at the door of the room he had looked into only a moment before.

He moved noiselessly back to the bedroom door, pushed it open and looked inside. It was as empty as it had been before. Or was it? There were three doors on the right side of the room, two of them rather narrow and evidently closet doors. The third door probably led into a bathroom. But had that door been ajar before?

Vedder frowned at it. He'd looked only casually into the bedroom before, but he would have sworn that all three doors on this side of the room had been closed. Now two were closed and one partly open. And he'd heard a creak somewhere in this vicinity. Of course, all old houses squeaked, but—

"Come out of there!" Vedder said.

The bathroom door remained half open—but the first closet door was suddenly hurled violently open and an apparition hurtled toward Sam Vedder!

The wrong door opening disconcerted Vedder so violently that he had only a fleeting glimpse of the figure that was coming toward him before it struck. But in that moment he saw no face, only a swathing of clothes.

It was a hard, violent figure that assaulted him and carried him back to the wall. It seemed all arms and knees and fists. A fist came out of nowhere and crashed against his windpipe, causing him to gag and gasp for breath. Another fist smashed him in the face; and while he was reeling from that blow, a knee kicked him in the groin.

Vedder felt himself falling and desperately threw out both hands in an encircling movement. He got them around a pair of legs and pulled hard—so hard that a heavy body crashed down on his head and flattened him, face downward, to the floor.

Weak from the savage, foul blows, Vedder still tried to squirm out from under the heavy body.

But the room seemed to fall on his head, and in one crashing display of fireworks, he plunged into unconsciousness.

Pain was lancing through Sam Vedder's head, but, otherwise, he was in full possession of his faculties. He rolled his eyes, saw that he was in Adam Lord's bedroom and scrambled to his feet.

His first impulse was to head for the kitchen and retreat from the apartment, by the door through which he had entered. But in the kitchen he found a raincoat on the floor, where it had evidently been thrown since his own entry into the place. Evidently it was the cloak his assailant had thrown away. That indicated that the party had fled. So, for the moment, Vedder was not in danger. Heartened by that knowledge, he went boldly down the hall to the living room and pushed open the door.

Adam Lord was in the living room. He was dead!

He was stretched out on a deep maroon-colored rug, beside a long couch. Near an outflung hand lay a revolver—a strangely heavy, long-barreled gun. Instinctively, Vedder stooped to pick up the gun, then caught himself in time. It wouldn't be wise to put his fingerprints on the weapon. He could, of course, wipe them off; but in doing so, he'd wipe out any other prints that might be on the gun. He decided to let well enough alone and gave his attention to Adam Lord.

The blackmailer had been shot squarely in the center of the forehead. The bullet had gone clear through his head and made a mess of the back of the skull. He had undoubtedly died instantly.

Taking a deep breath, Vedder knelt on the rug beside the dead man. The first thing he saw was the right jacket pocket turned out. Taking the dead man's coat lapel gingerly between his thumb and forefinger, he lifted it. The inside breast pocket was also protruding. That told Vedder that he was too late. Whoever had killed Adam Lord had searched him. Anything that was worth while finding was gone by now. Nevertheless, Vedder went through the grisly task of searching Adam Lord's pockets—and found nothing that interested him.

He got to his feet, then, and moved to a desk in the corner of the room. But before he reached it, he saw that the drawer was pulled out wide and the paper contents all mixed up. He swore softly to himself. Then a shudder ran through his body. He heard the shrill scream of a police-car siren outside.

Vedder didn't wait to think about it. He went out of Adam Lord's apartment like a cyclone. The siren might have nothing to do with Adam Lord. But Vedder was taking no chances of being caught in a room with a dead man with whom he had had a fist fight in a public place, earlier in the day.

He was down on the first floor when the siren wailed itself out, in front of Adam Lord's apartment house. His escape was blocked off in front, but there was a rear, service door that was latched on the inside. Vedder went through it, crossed a short yard in three bounds, clambered over a high wooden fence and scuttled for a yawning cellar doorway.

Two minutes later he emerged from an apartment house on Fifty-fourth Street, and sixty seconds after that he hailed a taxicab on Park Avenue. He directed the driver to take him to the Grand Central Station and, on the way, gnawed his knuckles and thought about his narrow escape on Fifty-third Street.

Why had the police come to Adam Lord's apartment? Because of a report or tip? Probably, but who had turned it in? The man who had attacked Vedder in the place? But *that* was the person who had killed Adam Lord. Why would he telephone the police and report the murder of the blackmailer? Because he needed an A-1 murder suspect and knew there was one, unconscious in Adam Lord's bedroom?

Vedder paid off his taxi at the Grand Central and went into the huge terminal. He wandered around the station for a while, then finally went into the newsreel theater.

He spent an hour in the theater, and not even the Donald Duck cartoon cheered him up.

He saw by the big clock over the information booth that it was five minutes to five and knew that he could not wander around indefinitely. He had to face the music sooner or later. Well, he didn't exactly have to face it, but he had to find out where he stood.

Accordingly, he went to the battery of telephone booths and dialed the number of the Bligh Detective Agency. When Emma Todd's voice said, "Bligh Detective Agency," Vedder cleared his throat.

"This is that man," he said. "What's the score?"

"The score," Emma Todd said sweetly, "is ten to nothing in the last half of the ninth and you're out!"

Vedder winced. "The skipper's sore?"

"Oh, no! He's not mad at all. Not more so than a hypochondriac with the gout who's just had his foot stepped on— You haven't been doing anything since you left the office this afternoon?"

"Anybody say I have?"

"Five minutes ago, a certain Park Avenue woman telephoned the office that she had to see that famous lady-killer detective, with whom she had lunch—"

"Evelyn Walker?"

"Of the Wall Street Walkers. Anyway, she's on her way to the office right now, and if you're not here when she arrives, I think the captain is going to be slightly vexed with you."

A wave of hope surged up in Vedder. "It's O. K. to come up to the office, then?"

"The welcome is out, if you're—" That was as

far as Vedder heard. He slammed the receiver on the hook and bounced out of the telephone booth. He almost ran through the station to the Vanderbilt Avenue exit and, there, hopped into a taxicab.

Seven minutes later he stepped out in front of the building housing the Bligh Detective Agency and ran into the lobby. Evelyn Walker was just going into an elevator. The door was closed in Vedder's face, and he stepped into the next car. It was just as well that Evelyn Walker got into the office first. She would be with Captain Bligh when Vedder came in, and the captain would be compelled to hold his temper.

When he entered the agency office, he found Emma Todd talking to a little insignificant-looking man in his middle thirties. People usually passed up Bob Catt—quite naturally nicknamed Bobcat—with a passing glance. And in that lay one of his greatest assets, for Bobcat was a human bloodhound. He could follow a man through the subways all day and never lose him.

III.

Bobcat and Emma both turned to face Vedder. Emma nodded to Captain Bligh's office and put a finger to her lips. Vedder motioned to Bobcat, and the latter followed Vedder to a corner.

Vedder whispered in Bobcat's ear. "While I'm in with the skipper, call up your pal at headquarters and find out what they've got on the Adam Lord killing."

"Lord?" Bobcat asked. "Say, ain't that the fella you—"

"*Sh-h-h!*" said Vedder. Then to Emma, loudly "Can I see the chief?"

Emma plugged in a connection on her tiny switchboard and said: "Mr. Vedder has just come in. Very well, sir."

Vedder entered Captain Bligh's office and closed the door behind him. Evelyn Walker was sitting in the red leather chair reserved for clients. Vedder was shocked at the sight of her face. It was pale and drawn and her lips twitched nervously.

There was a haunted look in her eyes. She seemed ten years older than when he'd had lunch with her at the Club 66, only a few hours ago.

And Captain Bligh looked worried. He almost never looked worried. He was generally beaming or scowling. Or in a towering rage.

Before Vedder could say anything, the captain held up his hand. "Mrs. Walker is in a rather serious predicament. It seems that the object of our earlier . . . er . . . operation has been killed."

Vedder blinked. It was an hour and half since the police had descended upon Adam Lord's apartment; yet it was at least fifteen minutes since Evelyn Walker had telephoned Captain Bligh that she was coming to the office. And she must have known the reason for the call some minutes before making it. That was timing it pretty close. The newspapers would just about be on the streets with the information about Adam Lord's murder.

The captain's next words, however, enlightened Vedder. "It seems that Mrs. Walker went to Adam Lord's apartment after your little fiasco at the Club 66. When she got there, she found Mr. Lord dead. He had been shot."

Vedder said: "What time did you go to Lord's apartment?"

Evelyn Walker shook her head. "I don't know exactly. Around three o'clock. Right after I telephoned to Captain Bligh the first time—"

"That was shortly after two thirty," Vedder cut in.

Evelyn Walker nodded. "Yes. It took me almost a half-hour to get to his apartment. I . . . when I saw him—" She shuddered and Bligh interposed smoothly.

"Naturally she was shocked and did what most people would have done under the circumstances. She picked up the gun."

Vedder winced. His own instinctive movement had been for the gun. And all that time the gun had carried Mrs. Walker's fingerprints.

Aloud, he said: "And you didn't wipe off your prints before leaving the apartment, is that it, Mrs. Walker?"

She nodded. "I . . . I was terrified. The only thing I could think of was to get out of there as fast as I could. I . . . ran out of the place."

"Anyone see you?"

"No. At least, I don't think so."

Vedder nodded. Then he said, casually: "By the way, how did you get into the apartment, Mrs. Walker?"

Her eyes widened. "Why—" Her voice caught in her throat and Vedder suggested:

"You had a key?"

Anger almost replaced the fright on her face. "Of course not; the . . . the door was open."

"Both doors? The downstairs one as well as the door from the second-floor hall?"

Captain Bligh's eyes jerked from Mrs. Walker's face to Vedder's. His head seemed to sink a little more solidly on his shoulders. He snapped:

"If there are two doors, of course they were open. That's beside the point, Vedder. The thing is, we've got to get that letter that you stupid—that you didn't get earlier. It's the only tie-up between Adam Lord and Mrs. Walker. If the police find it, they'll get suspicious and may try to get Mrs. Walker's fingerprints."

Vedder pursed up his lips. "Then you didn't search Adam Lord for the letter?"

Her eyes blazed angrily. "Of course not! I told you before that I left the apartment immediately. If I *had* killed him—which you seem to think—I most certainly would have remained long enough

to take the letter. In that case, I wouldn't be here, now."

Captain Bligh scowled at Vedder. "Mrs. Walker is quite right. She's given us an assignment to get that letter. And we're going to do that, understand, Vedder?"

Vedder leaned forward and touched the pearl button on the captain's desk. Almost immediately, Bobcat's head poked into the room.

"I've got some news you might like to hear," he said, grinning impertinently.

"Later," rumbled Captain Bligh.

Vedder shook his head. "No—now!"

"They've identified the gun that killed Adam Lord," Bobcat said.

Captain Bligh leaned forward across his desk. "Yes? Who does it belong to?"

Bobcat's tongue came out and licked his lips. He said: "Jesse James!"

Captain Bligh's head went back as if an invisible fist had smashed him in the mouth. He gasped:

"What the devil— Catt, are you trying—"

"That's what my pal at headquarters told me," Bobcat said, grudgingly. "The gun's a collector's item. The minute Sergeant Peabody, at headquarters, got hold of it, he spotted it for what it was. One of those old-time Navy Colts—.36 caliber. Peabody's a nut on guns, himself. He went through his museum books, or wherever he gets all that dope and says the gun had once belonged to Jesse James."

Captain Bligh slapped a big hand on his desk. "Now, wait a minute, Catt. I know a little about guns, myself. And Jesse James, too. He did carry a Navy Colt—and a Smith & Wesson—but when he was killed, his guns were taken from him by the sheriff. Those guns are worth a lot of money, and their history's pretty well known. We can find out who's supposed to have them today—"

Bobcat bobbed his head up and down. "That's right. Sergeant Peabody knows all about *those* guns. Even who's got them today. This gun that killed Lord isn't one of those, however. It's a gun Jesse carried through the Civil War. He gave it to a pal. The pal went down to Mexico and enlisted in Maximilian's army and got himself killed. The gun—well, the story's kind of long, but, anyway, Peabody says it disappeared about thirty years ago and this is the first time it's cropped up since—"

"I don't believe it," Sam Vedder suddenly burst out. "You couldn't shoot a gun that old in the first place." But even as he made the statement, there was a doubt in his mind. He had *seen* the murder weapon, and it *was* an old gun. To his recollection he had never even seen a gun of that type before.

He looked at Evelyn Walker. She was standing before the leather chair, a frown on her forehead. When she caught Vedder's eyes on hers, she averted her own.

Captain Bligh coughed a couple of times and then cleared his throat. After a moment he said, smoothly: "Was this Lord fellow a collector of guns, Mrs. Walker?"

She shook her head. "No, *he* wasn't." There was a slight emphasis on the word "he."

Vedder said, bluntly: "Who *is*—a gun collector?"

Mrs. Walker turned to Vedder and tossed her head impatiently. "Why, I don't know."

"None of your friends collect guns for a hobby?"

"Not that I know of. Well—yes. I think there is one. But I don't see what connection he could have had with Adam Lord. Wait! There's another person I know who collects guns and weapons, Roscoe Underwood, an old friend of my husband's family—"

"And the first man, Mrs. Walker?" Vedder asked.

She hesitated a moment before answering. "Why, he's not really a collector. I believe he has just a few pieces. He's more of a scholar than anything else. A friend of my husband, Stuart Canfield."

Captain Bligh took over the show again. "Very well, Mrs. Walker, we'll do our very best. Naturally, we can't guarantee success. But you have my word that we'll do our utmost to keep you out of this thing, even if it's too late to get the letter."

"It mustn't be too late," Evelyn Walker insisted. "It simply mustn't be. That letter—"

"Yes, yes, I understand perfectly. We'll do our very best."

She had to accept that, but as she was going out, she paused a moment at the door. Then, tossing her shapely head, she finally made her exit.

Captain Bligh waited until he was sure Mrs. Walker had gone through the outer office. Then he pounced on Sam Vedder. "All right, Vedder, where were you this afternoon?"

"There," said Sam Vedder. "At Adam Lord's. And Mrs. Walker lies like hell."

"Did you see her there?" snapped Bligh.

"No, but that door business; the vestibule door is kept locked by the tenants. I was in there before three thirty and the door was locked then and—"

"How'd *you* get in?"

"By buzzing one of the other apartments. Incidentally, there are only four in the building. Lord had the second-floor apartment. After I got inside the vestibule door, I let myself into Lord's apartment with a skeleton key. There was somebody in the place—somebody besides Lord." Vedder touched his head and winced. "He surprised me—"

"And got away!" Captain Bligh exclaimed witheringly. "I don't know why the devil I ever hired a sissy like you. Even that gigolo knocked you kicking at lunch today."

"*She* said that?" Vedder asked, bitterly. "I slipped, and a bunch of waiters jumped me before

I could get at him. But this second bozo—I never even got a look at his face."

Captain Bligh cursed fluently. "Well, go ahead, give me the layout."

"Why, otherwise, it was just like Mrs. Walker told you. Adam Lord was on the living-room rug, with a hole in his skull. The gun was next to him and it was an old-fashioned museum piece." He glanced at Bobcat. "It could have been one of those old Navy Colts. But there's something Mrs. Walker didn't mention—unless she's the one that did it. Lord had been frisked. His pockets were turned inside out. And someone had gone through his writing desk, too. If it wasn't Mrs. Walker, it must have been the bird who jumped me."

"It wasn't Mrs. Walker," said Captain Bligh. "Otherwise, she wouldn't have come in here with five grand— I mean, she wouldn't have come back here, trying to get us to get that letter. But how do you know the person who attacked you was a man? You said you didn't see him—"

"I didn't see his face. But it was a man all right. He was in a closet and dropped Lord's raincoat over his head to conceal his features. He was a very husky guy, too, the way he clouted me."

Captain Bligh frowned for a moment. Then he wheezed heavily. "That fellow being at the place may be a break for us. He got the letter off Lord. And if he's the guy who bumped Lord, he won't be going to the cops with the letter."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Vedder. "That guy tried to have *me* caught there. I mean, I'd hardly woke up than the cops were blowing their siren outside. Who else but this fellow who conked me telephoned the police?"

"You would make it tougher," snapped Bligh. "Well, I promised Mrs. Walker we'd try to keep her out of it. We've got to do it. Catt, you hustle down to Centre Street and find out from that stooge of yours what the cops know—or don't know. And you, Vedder, look up those gun collectors Mrs. Walker mentioned—Canfield and Underwood. Be discreet. Let them think you're a gun crank or something."

The captain pushed back his chair and reached for his hat on a nearby hatrack. "As for me, I've got a dinner date at my club. If something breaks before eight o'clock, you can have me paged there. After that time, I'll be home."

With that, Captain Bligh walked out. Vedder waited until he'd heard the captain's voice say good night to Emma Todd; then he said bitterly to Bobcat: "So he gives us the dirty work and *he's* going to his club. The big walrus!"

Bobcat chuckled. "You're getting paid, aren't you?"

"Seventy-five dollars a week! And he's already nicked Mrs. Walker for a five-thousand-dollar fee. For work you and I'll do—"

"Tut-tut, boys," said Emma Todd from the doorway. "Mustn't pan the boss when he isn't here. Here're the addresses you'll need in your work tonight, Hawkshaw."

"What addresses?" asked Vedder, reaching for the slip of paper Emma was holding out.

"The addresses of Mr. Underwood and Mr. Canfield. I had the dictograph open when you were all in there, and I looked these up for you."

Vedder reached for Emma, but she eluded him. "We'll save that for some evening after you taken me to dinner at the Club 66. And I promise I won't kill any blackmailer, either."

Vedder grimaced. "Jealous, eh? Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't think she did it. And before this is over, I think Mrs. Walker and I will be very good friends. Pals, maybe."

Emma got a saucy conical hat and put it on her head. "Pals!" she sniffed. "Maybe she'll write *you* a letter, too."

She went quickly to the outer door and disappeared.

Bobcat grinned at Vedder. "Well, are we going to make a night of it, or what?"

Vedder shrugged. "I'd like to hear what you pick up at headquarters. My work'll probably take me longer. Tell you what, you go to the Worden Hotel after you get finished. Sit in the lobby, and I'll telephone and have you paged."

"Make it the Beaumont-Vendome," suggested Bobcat. "I might as well sit around in the best. And call me Weatherford when you have me paged. It sounds better than Catt."

IV.

They locked the office and left the building together. Outside they parted, Bobcat heading south to go to the subway and Vedder walking to the north corner to catch a Madison Avenue bus. The first address on his slip of paper, that of Mr. Roscoe Underwood, was on Ninety-fifth Street.

It turned out to be a private house, a narrow, old three-story building of a style once in vogue among Manhattan's wealthy. A liveried butler answered Vedder's ring at the door.

"Mr. Underwood?" the butler said, loftily. "Did you have an appointment with him?"

"No," said Vedder, "I didn't. I just got into town this afternoon and thought I'd run in. They tell me he's got a few guns, and I thought if he had anything good I might buy a piece or two from him."

The butler's face brightened. "Guns, sir? Yes, I'm quite sure Mr. Underwood will see you. Will you step inside, please?"

Vedder followed the butler into a sitting room, and then the latter went off. He returned in a little while and said: "This way please."

Vedder entered a large room that was a veritable arsenal—if the guns were still capable of discharging lethal slugs. There were revolvers and rifles

and shotguns, of all sorts, shapes and sizes. They were hung on the walls, spread on the tables, protected in glass display cases. In the center of the room, on a sturdy table, stood an ancient Gatling gun, the forerunner of the modern machine gun.

A heavy-set man of about fifty-five turned from one of the display cases and pointed a huge horse pistol at Sam Vedder.

"What's this?" he asked abruptly.

Vedder's first impulse was to make a wild guess, but couldn't think of any guess to make; so he approached Underwood and looked closely at the gun. Then he pursed his lips and slowly shook his head.

Underwood exclaimed: "Ha! So you spotted it, too. Well, you're right. It's a phony. Weisbecker tried to palm it off to me as an authentic Patterson; but it isn't. It was made thirty years later. By the way—what's your name?"

"Sam Vedder. And I'm interested mainly in Colts—"

"Swell!" cried Underwood. He grabbed Vedder's arm and led him to a display case. "What do you think of this, every model the Colt factory ever made, including a replica of Sam Colt's dagger-revolver!"

Vedder's eyes darted over the guns in the case and finally singled out a weapon that looked as nearly as he could remember like the gun he had seen beside the dead body of Adam Lord.

"There's a fine specimen, Mr. Underwood," he said.

Underwood opened the case and took out the gun. "This was owned by General Custer. It was stolen from him right after the Battle of Gettysburg."

"Whatever became of Jesse James' guns?" Vedder asked, bluntly.

Underwood frowned. "Why, surely you know what happened to them! Sheriff Timberlake appropriated both. He gave one to—"

"Oh, I know about *those* guns," Vedder interrupted. "I was thinking of another gun, one he gave to a pal, during the war—" He stopped, for Underwood was regarding him strangely, through slitted eyes.

Underwood shook his head, then snapped at Vedder: "Did Stuart Canfield send you here?"

"Canfield?" Vedder repeated. "I don't even know him."

"What!" cried Underwood. "You're a gun collector and you never heard of Canfield?"

"I didn't say I'd never heard of him. I have—of course. But I've never met him—"

"Then why did you ask about Jesse James' gun?"

"No particular reason. It just happened to pop into my mind."

"You didn't know that I owned that gun?"

Vedder blinked. "You do? Let me see it."

"I haven't got it. It was stolen from me a month ago. One evening when Canfield was here. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Canfield, you mean?"

"There were some other people here that evening, but none of them were collectors, except Canfield." Underwood scowled at Vedder. "That's why I say it's damned funny Canfield sent you here."

"But he didn't. I just got through telling you I've never even met the man."

Underwood put the Navy Colt back in the case. He closed the door deliberately. "You'll excuse me," he said, bluntly. "I've a dinner engagement."

Vedder sighed. "Sorry to have taken up your time. Just one thing more—how much is that Jesse James gun worth?"

"To the average person—nothing. To me, plenty. Canfield offered me twenty thousand dollars for it, and I turned him down. That's why—well, never mind. Good evening, sir!"

Somewhat regretfully, Vedder took his leave. But once outside, he hurried to the corner and flagged a cruising taxi. He gave the driver Stuart Canfield's address on Gracie Square, near the East River, and fifteen minutes later climbed out before a twenty-story apartment house.

The rich draperies in the lobby meant money. And the fact that Canfield had offered Underwood twenty thousand dollars for a museum piece gave Vedder an idea of what to expect when he was finally let into Canfield's luxurious apartment.

A Filipino ushered him into Canfield's library, where the wealthy collector was reading an old book. Canfield was young, not more than thirty. He was tall, slender and blond, with a pleasant smile. Having inherited several million dollars, there was no reason why he shouldn't smile.

Shaking hands with Canfield, Vedder decided to throw subterfuge overboard. "I'll come to the point, Mr. Canfield. I'm a private detective, and I'm investigating a case that has to do with guns. I've been told that you're an authority on the subject."

Canfield nodded. "You're working on the Lord case, I suppose? I've just been reading about it in the newspapers. There's a photograph of the murder weapon. It's a Navy Colt, I can tell you that."

"Did you know that it's a gun that once belonged to Jesse James?"

Canfield shot a quick glance at Vedder. Then he shrugged. "I didn't know that; but I suspected it, since it was Adam Lord who was murdered."

"You know Lord?" Vedder asked, bluntly.

Canfield laughed shortly, without humor. "I knew him, but I didn't know anything good about him. He lived on women, and I don't like men who take money from women."

"Then we've got that in common," Vedder said. "But what did you mean by saying you guessed it was Jesse James' gun, since it was Adam Lord who was killed?"

Canfield pointed to the far side of the room, which was entirely lined with books—old books. "In addition to guns, I collect Americana—rare books on American history. I'm particularly interested in the early history of Missouri and Kansas. You've heard of Quantrell, the Civil War guerrilla? Adam Lord's grandfather was one of Quantrell's men."

"How do you know?"

"An Adam Lord was one of two guerrillas who were killed during the Lawrence, Kansas, massacre in 1863. That was the time Quantrell's band rode from Missouri into Kansas, burned the town of Lawrence and killed, in cold blood, one hundred and eighty of its citizens. It was one of the most brutal crimes of the Civil War."

"I've heard about it," Vedder said. "But I didn't know that Quantrell lost any men."

"He lost two. Larkin Skaggs and Adam Lord. Lord came from southern Missouri, where he had a wife and infant son—the present, rather late, Adam Lord's father. I might say that Adam's father was considered a respectable citizen. When he grew up he went into business in Springfield, Missouri. He had enough money to raise Adam as a gentleman. Unfortunately, Adam went through the money inside of three years after inheriting it. Since then—well, I guess you know how he made his living."

"I do, but I still can't figure out why you should connect Adam Lord's murder with Jesse James' gun."

Canfield frowned. "Perhaps there is no connection. But it's a coincidence—a mighty unusual coincidence. You see, Jesse James also was a member of Quantrell's guerrillas, although he wasn't at Lawrence. As far as that gun is concerned, Jesse was supposed to have presented it to Greg Cummings, who went to Mexico with Shelby and was killed down there. The gun was picked up by Harlow Bonniwell who kept it for almost twenty-five years. He finally sold it to—Adam Lord, II."

Vedder blinked. "You're getting close."

"I can come even closer. Adam Lord, II, bequeathed the gun to Adam Lord, III, who sold it to a collector named Underwood, about five years ago. Underwood lives right here in New York—"

"I know," said Vedder. "I've just come from him. He said that *you* had made him an offer for the gun."

Canfield rubbed his chin with the back of his hand and looked at Vedder through narrowed eyes. "Yes?" he said, softly.

Vedder shook his head. "The next move is yours."

"All right. Underwood thinks I stole that gun from him, because I offered him a fantastic price and he wouldn't take it."

"Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money for a gun, seventy-five years old."

Canfield sighed wearily. "Come along, I want to show you something."

He led Vedder into an adjoining room that was a smaller counterpart of Roscoe Underwood's gun room. The room was of pine paneling and along one wall hung a double row of revolvers of various sizes and makes. Each had a little white card attached to it. Canfield took down a short-barreled gun, at random.

"This," he said, "is a Patterson .28 caliber, one of the earliest models made by the Colt Patent Firearms Co. It was once owned by Sam Houston. Whether he had it with him at the battle of San Jacinto, I've been unable to verify; but the mere fact that Sam Houston once owned it makes it of value to me. And this"— Canfield put back the short-barreled gun and took down a huge .44, with a barrel at least nine inches long—"this was one of Wild Bill Hickok's guns. He used it when he was marshal of Abilene, Kansas." He handed Wild Bill Hickok's gun to Vedder and took down a revolver on which the tag was blank.

"This gun," he said, "was used by an assassin. It killed one of the greatest men this country has ever known."

Vedder frowned at the revolver. "Lincoln?"

Canfield smiled. "I can't tell you. This gun is supposed to be in a museum. I paid a high price for it, but I promised I would never tell anyone its actual case history. I'm showing you these guns just to convince you that I had no other motive for wanting to buy Underwood's Jesse James' Colt than mere collector's passion. I specialize in collecting guns with histories; pieces that were once used by famous personages. I believe I have a better collection of such pieces than any collector in this country. I'll say this much more, I'd give my eyeteeth to get that gun that killed Adam Lord."

Vedder thought about that. Then he nodded slowly. He could strike Stuart Canfield's name off his list of possible suspects. If Canfield had killed Lord, he most certainly would not have done so with Jesse James' gun; or if he had, he would never have left the weapon behind. Not unless he were pressed for time—

But the murderer of Adam Lord hadn't been pressed for time. He'd been in Lord's apartment when Evelyn Walker had called. He had remained long enough for her to leave and for Sam Vedder to make a leisurely entry.

Or hadn't the man who had attacked Vedder been the murderer?

Canfield crossed the room and picked up the book he had laid down. He smiled at Sam Vedder. The hint was enough for the latter. He said:

"Thanks, Mr. Canfield." But as he was going out, he turned. "You wouldn't have any ideas as to who *might* have had it in for Lord?"

"Yes," said Stuart Canfield. "You! I was at the Club 66 today when he—socked you."

Vedder gave Canfield a dirty look, grunted and departed.

V.

His mind was preoccupied as he left the apartment house, and when a taxicab eased forward along the curb and the driver called: "Taxi?" Vedder merely nodded his head.

But another voice, sharper, called to him. "Hey, sucker!"

Vedder turned his head, saw the taxi and something else. A broad face looking out over the lowered window and beneath the face a businesslike .38!

"Taxi, sucker?" snarled the man with the gun.

Vedder groaned. His first impulse was to make a run for it. But even as he thought about it, he knew that he'd never be able to outrun a bullet. Not here, at least. The street was too deserted and there were no holes to scurry into.

He moved toward the taxi, and the door was thrown open. A big hand reached out and, catching Vedder's coat, jerked him inside! He fell on his hands and knees and before he could get up, the cab was leaping away.

A fist smashed against Vedder's jaw and slammed him against the rear of the driver's compartment! He relaxed and slumped into a cramped position on his back and shoulders.

He looked into a face that reminded him strongly of Tony Galento's, except that it was mean-looking. The body that went with the face weighed as much as Galento's.

"You're making a mistake," Vedder said. "I'm not the man you're looking for."

"How do you know who I'm lookin' for?" the big man sneered.

"Your method," Vedder retorted. "You must be sore at someone, and it can't be me because you don't know me."

"I know you're a cheap private dick who's butting his nose into things that don't concern him," the man with the gun said. "And I'm damned if I'm going to let you mess things. Catch on?"

Vedder shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The big fellow grinned icily. Without warning, he raised one foot and kicked Vedder in the stomach. Vedder gasped, started to clutch at his stomach, then frantically threw up his hands and blocked a savage kick at his face. He squirmed back, to be as far from the big man's feet as possible. But it wasn't far enough. The thug slid down in his seat and kicked out with both feet.

In sheer desperation, Vedder clutched at the feet and catching them, jerked hard. The big man spilled off the seat to the floor of the cab. He roared:

"Why, you damn—"

Vedder let go of the other's feet and put everything he had into a lunge for the .38. He missed the gun by inches as the big man drew it back.

At that moment the cab driver in front cried out: "Easy, Jake! We're in a traffic jam!"

Hope surged up in Vedder. He made a desperate effort and partly spilled the big man's body from his own! Then he lunged for the door handle. His clawing fingers got hold of it, pulled down and the door swung out. Vedder squirmed again and catapulted out of the stalled taxi into the street.

Behind him he heard a bellow of rage. But around him people began murmuring in awe, and nearby a policeman's whistle blasted.

Vedder scrambled to his hands and knees, bruised and battered, and looked around him. He was at a busy intersection, people were scurrying around him. Now, they were rushing back pell-mell as the taxi took the fender off another car, made a swift turn against the lights and roared up a side street.

The traffic cop swooped down on Vedder, grabbed his coat collar and yanked. "Here, you! What's going on?" he yelled.

"Some thugs tried to kidnap me," Vedder exclaimed. "I broke loose and jumped out of their car."

"Kidnaped!" cried the cop. "Say—" He shook his head in bewilderment, let go his clutch on Vedder's collar. "Uh . . . what's your name?"

"Sam Vedder. I'm a private detective—" He stopped, for an expression of amazement came over the cop's face.

"Sam Vedder?" he gasped. "Why, you're . . . you're—" His fist swooped out again and once more caught hold of Vedder's collar. And this time the grip was more secure than ever. "You're under arrest!" the cop bellowed.

"Under arrest?" Vedder echoed. "You're crazy. I said *I* had been kidnaped—"

"You said your name's Vedder and that you're a private detective. Well, you're under arrest. There's been a call out for you for an hour. Every cop in the city's looking for you. You're wanted for—murder!"

Sam Vedder had outsmarted himself. The police, investigating the murder of Adam Lord, had learned about Lord's fight at the Club 66. From Evelyn Walker—Vedder groaned when he learned about that treachery—they had obtained Sam Vedder's name. While the police had been at Adam Lord's apartment, a messenger had brought in a box of roses that he had been unable to deliver before. They had run down that clue and, at the florist's, had obtained a description of a man who tallied exactly with the description of the one who had fought with Adam Lord at the Club 66.

So now, Sam Vedder was in a little room down at headquarters—a little room vacant of furniture except for several chairs. One of the chairs, an armless one, was standing directly below a 300-watt electric bulb. Sam Vedder was sitting in the chair and all around him were men whose weight averaged

Vedder lunged for the door handle . . . and catapulted out of the stalled taxi into the street. . . .

over two hundred pounds. They were detectives.

Vedder had already told his story three times—that part of it which he knew he could not avoid telling—but still the detectives were belaboring him with questions.

"How did you get into Lord's apartment?"

"What'd the man look like who attacked you there?"

"Why did you go to Adam Lord's apartment? On behalf of what client?"

Vedder had remained loyal to his client—and his profession. He had not revealed that Evelyn Walker was a client of the Bligh Agency. In admitting his identity, she had called him a friend. And he stuck to that. Yes, he'd been socked by Lord at the Club 66. Yes, he'd gone over and provoked an argument with Lord. Why? Because Lord had tried to flirt with his luncheon guest.

Too thin!

"All right," Vedder glowered. "It's thin, but it's true. No guy is going to wink at my . . . at any friend of mine while she's having lunch with me."

"That," said Inspector Downing, sarcastically, "is a very noble sentiment—except that Mrs. Walker

was an old friend of Lord's. She'd been seen with him several times."

"I didn't know it," Vedder insisted.

A detective, who weighed fifty pounds less than any of those who were pumping Vedder, came into the room and whispered into Inspector Downing's ear.

Downing scowled. "Damn it! All right—send him in!"

Captain Billy Bligh came into the room. He was smiling—no, beaming.

Sam Vedder groaned and shrank down in his chair.

"Hello, Sam," the captain greeted him. "What're they doing to you?"

"Nothing, Bill," growled Inspector Downing. "Nothing compared to what we're going to do with him."

"And what is that, Downing, old boy?"

"We're going to book him on a murder charge, that's what, Billy, old boy. *Tsk! Tsk!* You ought to tell your boys that even they can't go around knocking off citizens."

"Ha-ha, Downie," laughed Captain Bligh. "Always joking. That's what I like about you fellows. I was saying the same thing only an hour ago to the commissioner. We were having dinner together at the club, and I said to the commissioner that—"

"Damn you, Bligh," snarled Inspector Downing. "I thought we were rid of you when you quit the force. If you had to start up an agency, why couldn't you move to Chicago or Seattle and do it? Why'd you have to stick around here and bother us?"

Captain Bligh beamed. "Why, someone had to be here and keep you boys in line." The smile suddenly left his face and it became mean and pugnacious. "Downing, you fool, you ought to know better than to try to sweat one of my boys. I look after them—"

"Yeah," said Downing, bitterly, "by handshaking with the commissioner. But even he can't stop this lad from being booked on a murder charge—"

"Go ahead, book him," challenged Bligh. "I've got Eggleston out in the other room on an open wire to Judge Purdy's. He'll have a habeas-corpus writ down here in fifteen minutes."

Inspector Downing swore luridly. "But damn it, Bligh, this punk broke into Lord's apartment!"

"What'd he steal?"

"I don't know, yet. But—aw, hell! Take him and get out of here before I start to bawl."

Sam Vedder got up from his chair under the big electric-light bulb. Captain Bligh dropped an arm fondly about his shoulders.

But as they passed through the door, the arm became a savage hug and the captain said: "You blundering, ignorant, half-baked numskull! You've caused me more trouble in one day than I've had in a year. You stupid—" Captain Bligh made a tremendous effort and beamed again. The reason for the beam was that they had passed through a short hall and entered a large room in which, among other people, were Bobcat and Evelyn Walker. Beside Evelyn Walker was a tall, well-built man of about forty.

"Captain Bligh," Mrs. Walker said, "this is my husband. Jim—Captain Bligh. And Mr. Vedder."

Jim Walker did not offer to shake hands. He nodded, curtly. "I think we'd better go somewhere and have a talk."

"That," boomed Captain Bligh, "would be a good idea."

As they left the headquarters building, Sam Vedder managed to say into Evelyn Walker's ear, "So you tossed me to the wolves!"

She shot him a quick, annoyed look.

VI.

At the curb was a large limousine. The Walkers and the members of the Bligh Agency climbed in. Vedder and Bobcat drew the folding seats.

As the car started off, Jim Walker said crisply: "Evelyn's told me. She's been indiscreet. Well, it's too late to do anything about that, now. The thing is to keep her out of it. Captain Bligh, I understand you have a pull—I mean, some influence with the commissioner."

"I know him," Bligh said. "I don't know him well enough to get him to wipe your wife's fingerprints off that gun. No one knows the commissioner well enough for that."

"But she's got to be kept out of it!" snapped Walker. "Understand, it must not come out that she visited Lord's apartment."

Vedder asked: "Did the police get your prints, Mrs. Walker, when they questioned you about—me?"

Mrs. Walker's forehead creased. "I don't think so. Did they, Jim?" She turned to her husband.

"That Inspector Downing came up and asked her what took place at the Club 66. They had the story, of course, before they came up. There was no use denying that Evelyn had been at the club, and it would have been foolish to pretend that she didn't know your name."

Vedder nodded. "I'm not sore. But what about those fingerprints?"

"No, of course not. They didn't dare take them. She can't be connected in any way, if you people will keep your mouths shut—"

"The Bligh Agency," said Captain Bligh, pompously, "has never yet betrayed a client. In that respect, also, I can vouch for my employees. It was Mr. Catt, here, who got the tip-off about the identification of the gun and—"

Evelyn Walker gasped. "That card, Jim! The one the inspector handed me when he first came in.

Do policemen usually carry calling cards?"

Captain Bligh exclaimed: "No! That was a trick on Downing's part. He took the card back again, didn't he? Yes, of course. He handed you that card to get your fingerprints. Damn! He knows, then, and he's laying low."

Jim Walker's face became tense. "I wouldn't have had that happen for anything! Do you suppose they're going to arrest Evelyn?"

Captain Bligh shrugged. "Probably, but not until tomorrow at least. They've looked up your standing, Mr. Walker, and they're going to go easy. But your wife's fingerprints are on that gun. That's bad!"

Jim Walker turned to his wife. "After this is over, you're going to have some explaining to do."

Evelyn Walker's chin went up an inch and her nostrils flared. Sam Vedder nodded approvingly. Then, suddenly, he said: "Mr. Walker, are you a collector of old guns?"

Walker shook his head impatiently. "No, I've got a few guns, but they're hunting guns."

"Well, would you like to collect guns? I've an idea—"

"Take your time, Sam," Captain Bligh interrupted sarcastically. "Take your time. Let it hatch, and then tell us about it at your leisure."

Vedder gave his chief a dirty look. Then he faced Walker. "The idea is just this—buy a bunch of old guns, let your wife handle them; then when Inspector Downing comes around and pops out that your wife's fingerprints are on that old Navy Colt, you act surprised and exclaim: 'Why, that looks like one of *my* guns. It was stolen from me a couple of weeks ago. Naturally, my wife's fingerprints would be on it.'"

Captain Bligh roared. "That'll work, Mr. Walker! With the right air, you can put it across. They wouldn't dare give you—or Mrs. Walker—the third degree. And if you have your lawyer handy when they do the questioning, they're going to be mighty careful with their insinuations and accusations."

"And where," asked Jim Walker, "am I going to get all these guns?"

"Maybe you can buy them from Henry Underwood—or Stuart Canfield," Vedder suggested.

Walker's breath seemed to come faster, and he glared at Vedder. "What do you know about Underwood and Canfield?"

"Not much," said Vedder, "except that they collect guns. I thought maybe you might buy some from them, to make up your own collection. Or you might try Weisbecker."

Captain Bligh exclaimed, "Since when do you know so much about gun collectors, Sam?"

"I know lots of things," said Vedder. "This Weisbecker is a dealer. He might be your best bet for those guns."

"Where's he located?" asked Walker. "I'd rather buy from a dealer than a collector."

"Why, I don't know his address offhand. You'll find him in the phone directory."

"Good. There's no time to lose on this. I'll have to get the guns before tomorrow. Captain Bligh, can I drop you anywhere?"

Captain Bligh frowned and looked out of the window. "This'll be as good a place as any. Call me when you've got this gun collection out at your place."

"I will." Walker spoke to his chauffeur, and the limousine pulled up to the curb. The members of the Bligh Agency got out, and the limousine drew off.

Vedder saw that they were on Lexington Avenue, near Forty-second. He said to the captain: "I've got a lead I think I'll run down—"

Captain Bligh caught his arm. "Wait a minute; you've got some explaining to do. How'd you happen to get picked up by the cops?"

"Just like I told them. Some guy pulled up in a taxi and poked a rod in my face. He made me get in. I waited until we got into heavy traffic—by a stop-and-go light—then I let him have it. I piled out of the cab and by bad luck happened to fall into a cop's arms."

"That's your version," Captain Bligh growled. "Well, I haven't got time to listen to all your lies. Did you see Underwood and Canfield?"

"Yes, the gun that killed Lord was stolen from Underwood about a month ago—"

"Why, you blithering idiot!" howled Captain Bligh. "You're letting the Walkers walk right into it. If that gun's traced to Underwood, the cops'll know Mrs. Walker couldn't have handled it."

"I dunno about that. You see, the gun was swiped from Underwood's while there was a crowd of people at his house, including the Walkers. He thinks Stuart Canfield stole it, but it *could* have been the Walkers. As far as the police are concerned—"

"You—" the captain swore. "That's getting the Walkers to admit they're thieves."

"It's better being a thief than a murderer, skipper. Mr. Underwood wouldn't press any charges against the Walkers. He couldn't anyway—without proof that Jim Walker, or his wife, stole the gun. Besides, the story's just screwy enough to be convincing to the cops. The Walkers can pretend hush-hush about the gun, on account of Underwood, and Downing will probably fall for it."

The captain looked bitterly at Vedder. "How you can mix up these things. But what about Canfield? Why couldn't he have been the thief—and the murderer?"

Vedder screwed up his mouth. "He could be. But for every thousand bucks that Walker or Underwood have, young Canfield's got a million."

"Oh, he's *that* Canfield," Bligh said. "Well, it's been a large evening. I'm going back to my club

and get a Turkish bath. See if you can keep out of jail until tomorrow morning— Hey, taxi!"

The taxi skidded to the curb and Captain Bligh climbed in. Bobcat said to Vedder, then: "The big moose! He never even asked me what I've been doing tonight."

"Well, what have you been doing?"

"Just getting all the dope at headquarters, that's all. Downing knows damn well that it's Evelyn Walker's prints on the gun. That's why he was willing to let you go. What he really wanted out of you was an admission that you went up to Lord's on a job for Mrs. Walker. He suspects blackmail, but is afraid to come out with it, until he's got proof. Walker throws a lot of weight down around Wall Street."

"And the other birds—Canfield and Underwood?"

"They don't know anything about Underwood. Canfield's just what you said—so loaded down with bucks he can't even move around without the press being on hand. He got into a jam five or six years ago—"

"What kind of a jam?"

"Shooting," Bobcat replied. "He got a mad on a guy and plugged him. The guy recovered, and Canfield paid heavy sugar to squelch him—and fix the police rap. Since then, they say, he's behaved himself. Gone in for hobbies and stuff. But—he's got it bad for Evelyn Walker."

"So! And what does she think about it?"

Bobcat coughed. "Well, no one told me, but it's my guess that that's what Lord was blackmailing her about."

Vedder inhaled softly. "Say maybe that wasn't a letter she wrote to Lord at all—but one she wrote Canfield that Lord got hold of."

"Could be," said Bobcat. "Except if it was, why didn't Canfield try to get it from Lord? Any gentleman would do that."

"Maybe," said Vedder grimly, "Canfield did just that. Or maybe Jim Walker knew more about what his wife was doing, before tonight, than he let on. He might have gone to get that letter himself."

"Take your choice and lay your money," Bobcat said. "Well, you going to call it a night?"

"What for? It's only ten thirty. Look, I want you to chase back to headquarters and get some more dope from that gun-shark pal of yours. Find out what else he knows about that Navy Colt. As far's I've been able to learn, Jesse James gave that gun to some pal during the Civil War, who got bopped down in Mexico. After about twenty years the gun came into the hands of Adam Lord's father—"

"Oh-oh!" exclaimed Bobcat. "It ties in, huh?"

"It does. Lord sold the gun to Underwood about five years ago, and it was swiped from Underwood a month ago. Now, what I want to know is, how do all these fellows know that this is the original gun of Jesse James? Did Jesse write down the serial number and tell somebody—or what? And I want to know if anyone besides Jesse James, Greg Cummings—Jesse's pal—and the Lords have owned that gun at some time or another. Can you get that dope?"

"I think so. Although Peabody's going to be sore at me. He's the one tipped me that you'd been picked up."

"Well, bull him along. And then go to the Beaumont. I'll telephone you there."

"Using the name of Weatherford!"

VII.

Vedder crossed the street and headed for Grand Central, less than a block away. He went into the big terminal and proceeded to the battery of telephone booths on the main floor. He opened a classified directory and looked under "Guns."

He found the name Weisbecker, wrote an address on a slip of paper and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he stood there a moment, scratching his head.

On the spur of the moment, he stepped into a telephone booth and dropped a nickel into the coin slot. He raised his hand to dial Weisbecker's number and at that moment glanced out of the narrow window of the door. Five feet away, a fat, scowling face glared at him.

Vedder gulped. It was Jake, the gunman who had kidnaped and kicked him around in a taxi before Vedder had been able to make his lucky escape. How the devil had the man followed him to this place?

Had he been outside of headquarters and followed Jim Walker's limousine?

A fine film of perspiration broke out on Vedder's forehead. He was unarmed, and the man outside carried a .38! Not only that, but he was more than a match for Vedder, physically.

Yet, Vedder was safe here in Grand Central. The big man, Jake, most certainly would not shoot or assault him in such a public place. Or would he?

All those thoughts ran through Vedder's mind in the moment his index finger hovered over the telephone dial. Then, suddenly, he began dialing a number. But it wasn't the gun dealer's number. It was the number of Emma Todd.

And she was home.

He said: "Emma, this is the boy friend—"

"Boy friend, my foot!" Emma denied. "And what's the idea calling me at this time of the night?"

"The idea," said Vedder, "is that I'm in a telephone booth, and there's a man outside who's got a gun and is waiting for me to come out."

Emma's squeak of fright warmed Vedder's heart.

"Where are you?" she cried. "I'll send the police there right away!"

"No," said Vedder. "I'm not in such good standing with the cops. Captain Bligh just got me out

of jail. That's where this fellow picked me up—he was waiting outside the headquarters and waited until I'd left Bobcat and Bligh. I'm in Grand Central, now."

"Well, stay there!" exclaimed Emma Todd. "He's not going to try anything there, is he?"

"I don't think so. But I certainly can't stay in this booth all night."

"But there must be a dozen policemen around the station who don't know you—"

"Sure," Vedder admitted. "But can I go up to one and say a heavy-set man is following me and I think he's got a gun in his pocket?"

"I'll call Captain Bligh," Emma said. "He'll know what to do—"

"No, no!" howled Vedder. "I'd rather be shot than have him come to the rescue. I just thought of something. I'm supposed to call Bobcat in a half-hour or so. I'll stay here in the station until then. Between us we can work out something."

Emma's sigh of relief was pleasant to hear. "But call me in a half-hour. I'll be worried sick until I hear that you're all right."

"Ah," said Vedder. "Then you do care?"

"Why, you big lummox!" Emma cried. "You're doing this for a gag. You're drunk, that's what—"

Vedder chuckled and hung up the receiver. Then he jerked open the door and stepped swiftly out of the telephone booth.

Jake moved forward. "Hey, sucker!"

Vedder pretended not to hear. Dodging the big man, he went swiftly out into the concourse of the station. Behind him, he heard the click of heavy heels, and it was an effort not to look around.

He went straight up to the information booth and pretended to look up train schedules in a timetable he took from the rack. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jake scowling at him. Jake's big hands were in his coat pockets.

When he moved away from the information booth, Jake moved with him. In the distance, Vedder picked out a blue-uniformed policeman and strolled along with him, apparently idling away time, as were fifty or more other men and women in the station.

Jake kept a safe distance away, but every time Vedder turned, he saw the thug's eyes on him. Jake was playing it safe. Should Vedder talk to the policeman and the latter come toward him, Jake would make a quick move for the station exits.

Vedder decided to give the big thug a thrill. He suddenly went up to the policeman and said: "Excuse me, officer, could you tell me where the St. Louis train comes in?"

The officer pointed in the direction of the information booth—the direction in which Jake was walking. To the latter, it must have seemed as if the policeman were pointing at him, for he suddenly whirled and walked rapidly away.

The policeman said to Vedder: "Ask there at the booth."

Vedder turned toward the booth and Jake, who had halted a safe distance away, began closing in on him again. Vedder groaned. He *had* to lose Jake. He couldn't stay here in the Grand Central all night. And he couldn't leave without Jake swooping down on him and attacking him. He couldn't even duck into a taxicab outside; there were too many cabs around the station, and Jake could readily step into another and give pursuit.

Of course, Vedder could start a fight with Jake. One of the station policemen would interfere and they'd both wind up in a police station. Vedder frowned at the thought of that. To have Bligh get him out twice in one evening was a little too much.

No, Vedder had to lose Jake by strategy, or by some method that didn't involve physical prowess. Physical? Well, Jake was a pretty rough customer, but how was he at running?

Vedder grinned crookedly. Yes, how was Jake at running?

He walked carelessly to the room at the west end of the station where the train schedules were posted. He watched Jake close in on him. Outside the door leading into the schedule room Vedder looked down the long tunnel that led to the Roosevelt Hotel on Forty-fifth Street, almost three blocks away. It was a good, straight run.

He bolted down the runway!

Behind him Jake yelled and gave pursuit. He was forty or fifty feet behind Vedder when they started the run. By the time Vedder had gone half the distance, he looked over his shoulder and saw that Jake was a hundred feet behind. He put on an extra burst of speed, reached the door leading into the Roosevelt Hotel and took the stairs to the lobby, two at a time.

In the lobby he stopped running, but walked swiftly and purposefully to the Forty-sixth Street exit. On the sidewalk, he whipped to the right and headed for Park Avenue and the New York Central Building. He was just turning in, when Jake burst out of the door of the Roosevelt Hotel, a block away.

Vedder chuckled and darted into the New York Central Building. He went swiftly through the lobby and descended a flight of stairs to a tunnel that was a counterpart of the one leading from the Grand Central Terminal to the Roosevelt Hotel.

He raced down it as fast as he could. This time he didn't look around until he reached the end of the tunnel. Then he turned and saw Jake at the far end.

"There's more than one way to skin a cat," Vedder muttered to himself, "and more than one way to lick a big bruiser."

He made his way swiftly to Lexington Avenue, jumped into a taxicab and ordered the driver to take him to Times Square. At Times Square he

paid off the driver, got out and walked to Forty-fourth Street. Just an extra precaution in case Jake had spotted him climbing into the cab on Lexington and followed. There he took another cab and directed the man to take him to Chinatown.

The taxi went to Forty-sixth Street, turned right and began rolling eastward. It turned south on Second Avenue and scuttled under the el tracks. The cabby was a good driver and managed to keep with the green lights most of the way down to the Bowery.

There, Vedder consulted his slip of paper and gave an address on Mott Street. He climbed out on the narrow street in the heart of Chinatown, paid the meter charge and looked around. He saw mostly neon signs advertising chop-suey places.

The store before which Vedder stood was dark, but there was enough light on the street for him to make out the lettering on the windows:

M. WEISBECKER
Curios Armor Guns

He stepped up to the door and peered into the store. In the rear, he could see a light near the store's vault, but the place was vacant.

VIII.

He walked back to the curb and looked up. There were apparently apartments above the store, and, on the second floor, a chink of light showed under a drawn shade. There was an entrance to the apartments, beside the store windows, and Vedder approached it. He tried the door, found it open and went inside.

Dank, stale air assailed his nostrils. He struck a match and saw a series of mailboxes. He read names:

ON LEONG QUONG
FU SIN MU
MOCK WANG

Then two incongruous un-Chinese names:

A. COHEN
M. WEISBECKER

There were pearl buttons opposite the names. Vedder pushed the one beside Weisbecker's name and struck a second match. When it burned to his fingers he lit another match. When that one burned down and there was still no response to his ring, he muttered under his breath and began climbing the dark staircase.

He felt strangely cold on the dark stairs. Merely being in Chinatown gave him a feeling of uneasiness. To invade an airless, dank, dark house caused the short hairs to stand erect on the back of his neck.

He tried to make the entire climb in darkness, but when he had gone two thirds of the way, he gave in and struck another match. By its light he finished his ascent and before he threw away the match had another ready.

On the landing, he looked around. There was only one door in sight. He stepped up to it and pounded on it with his fist, at the same time calling: "Hey, Mr. Weisbecker!"

The door was jerked open and a fat, perspiring man wearing brocaded-silk Oriental garments scowled at him.

"What d'you want?" he snapped.

The man most certainly was not Chinese. Vedder said: "Your name Weisbecker?"

"What if it is?"

"If you're Weisbecker," Vedder said, "I sent you a customer. Did you sell him a bill of goods?"

Jim Walker appeared behind Weisbecker: "You, Vedder," he said. Then to Weisbecker: "All right, Mr. Weisbecker, he's the man who referred me to you."

Somewhat reluctantly, Weisbecker let Vedder into his flat. Vedder inhaled softly when he saw the interior of the place. For a man who lived in Chinatown, Weisbecker did himself well. Rich Oriental tapestries hung from the walls. The furniture was of hand-carved teakwood, and the deep rugs on the floor had, no doubt, come directly from Persia.

Walker looked inquiringly at Vedder. "Something's come up?"

Vedder shook his head. "No, I merely wanted to know if you came out all right—on the guns."

"We're dickering," Weisbecker said, grouchily, "but I'm telling you right now—if you came to knock down a commission, you're wasting your time. I'm already quoting Mr. Walker the lowest prices in the history of my business. You take that there six-barreled revolving rifle—"

Vedder's eyes were already on a long teakwood table, on which Weisbecker had spread out an assortment of implements and relics that he apparently called guns.

Vedder said: "You take them. Does Mr. Walker look like a junkman? He wants revolvers and pistols, that's all. Colts, Remingtons, Smith & Wessons—"

Weisbecker howled. "I knew it. You're trying to kill a sale."

"No, he isn't," Walker said, shortly. "He's right. I don't want any contraption like a six-barreled revolving rifle. I want a few revolvers—Navy Colts."

"Guns with histories," Vedder added. "Some that were owned by famous people, like Andrew Jackson or General Grant—or Jesse James!"

Weisbecker's eyes popped open. "Jesse James? What? Say—"

"You've got a Navy Colt that was once owned by Jesse James?" Vedder snapped.

Weisbecker's fat cheeks puffed out like a squirrel's stuffed with acorns.

"I don't know you gentlemen!" he wheezed. "I . . . I think you better come back tomorrow, during the day, in my store. We talk business then. It's late, now, and I want to get to bed."

"So!" said Vedder. "You do know something about a Navy Colt once owned by Jesse James. Someone offered it to you—or you've got it—"

"No, no! I don't know anything about it. I . . . I guess I read something about it once. Yeah, that's it—something in the newspapers I read once."

"Come again, Weisbecker," said Vedder. "You didn't read about *this* gun in the papers. Someone tried to sell it to you—a Mr. Adam Lord? Yes, the man who was killed today with the same Jesse James gun. When did he try to sell it to you?"

"A long time ago— No, I don't know any Adam Lord. I don't want to be mixed up in any police business. Murder . . . they'll—"

Jim Walker came suddenly to Weisbecker's rescue. "I don't see what you're gaining by this, Mr. Vedder. After all, I merely came here to buy a few guns. What's past is past. Mr. Weisbecker, let's get on with our business."

Perspiration was streaming down Weisbecker's fat face. He was staring at Sam Vedder, his mouth opening and closing like that of a fish out of water. "No," he said, "I . . . we can't do any business. Not now. I— It's awful late, and I'm tired. I want to go to bed. Come back tomorrow, yes?"

He stopped. His eyes bulged and his mouth opened wide and sucked in air in a wheezy gulp.

Vedder jerked his head around. The door was partly open and a slight, mild-eyed man of about thirty-five smiled and knocked lightly on the inside of the door.

"Excuse me," he said, "I was just going to knock and the door was open."

"And I suppose you were going to ring the bell downstairs, too, only you couldn't find the bell," Vedder snapped sarcastically.

The slight man smiled apologetically. Then he bobbed his head up and down. "Yes, you answer his description. You're Sam Vedder?"

Vedder blinked in astonishment. "How the— How do *you* know?"

"A friend of mine described you to me. And . . . er . . . I got a glimpse of you earlier this evening, at police headquarters. My name is Peabody."

"Sergeant Peabody!" Vedder gasped. "Bobcat's pal."

"A fine chap," Sergeant Peabody said warmly. "My very best friend. Unfortunate, his association with—" Peabody caught himself and coughed. "I mean, he's a very capable man. You'd hardly take him for a private detective."

"No one'd take you for a cop, either," Vedder retorted. "What's the idea of busting in here?"

"Why, it seems that I was guilty of an indiscretion. I confided more than I should have in my friend, Bobcat, and my superiors learned about it. In short, I'm in the dog house, because I told Bobcat you were being held for questioning and he brought in that big—brought in your employer, Captain Bligh. Who, to put it mildly, is somewhat of a thorn in Inspector Downing's soft flesh."

During the byplay between Sergeant Peabody and Sam Vedder, Weisbecker, the gun dealer, had recovered his composure. "I was just telling the gentlemen, sergeant, that I don't do business in my home. If they'll come around to the store downstairs during the day, I'll be glad to sell them—"

"That rare, six-barreled revolving rifle Mr. Walker is so interested in!" Vedder said quickly.

Sergeant Peabody cocked his head to one side. "You're interested in rifles, Mr. Walker? That's a very fine piece on the table there. It was first used by the Texas Rangers against the Comanche Indians. Do you also collect revolvers, Mr. Walker?"

Jim Walker scowled at Sergeant Peabody, then shifted his gaze to Sam Vedder as if to ask: "You got me into this. Now what do I do?"

Vedder said, "Mr. Walker collects mainly rifles, but he has a few revolvers—"

"Navy Colts, Mr. Walker?" Sergeant Peabody purred.

"Yes, I've got some Navy Colts!" Jim Walker exclaimed. "What about it?"

"Why, nothing about it," replied Peabody, mildly. "It's just that I'm interested in guns myself—and Americana. Missouri and Kansas—the frontier history of those States—is my particular hobby. I'm somewhat of a romanticist, I'm afraid. The exploits of the border outlaws interest—"

"Bobcat's told me all about your hobby, sergeant," Vedder cut in. "I think Mr. Weisbecker's right, Walker. We'd better come back tomorrow and look over the larger collection down in the store. Be seeing you again, Sergeant Peabody—"

He signaled to Jim Walker and began moving toward the door. Peabody, too, nodded at Weisbecker and started to leave with them. It wound up with Walker, Vedder and Peabody all clumping down the dark staircase.

Out on the street, Vedder growled at Peabody. "Which way are you going, sergeant?"

"Oh," said Peabody, "I haven't anywhere in particular to go. I'll run along with you."

"No, you won't. I've got some private business with Mr. Walker."

"Perhaps it's my business, too," Peabody cut in, mildly. "Rather, I should say the business of the police department. May I ask, Mr. Walker, why you came down here at this time of the night to buy guns?"

"Do we ask the police department why their

traffic cops still ride horses when everyone knows the automobile is here to stay?" Vedder retorted.

"I think," said Jim Walker, coldly, "I've had enough for one night. I'm going home. Taxi!"

A cruising taxi whirled in toward the curb and stopped. Walker opened the door and stepped in. Vedder crowded after him and slammed the door in Sergeant Peabody's face.

"Get going!" he yelled to the cabby.

The taxi leaped away and Vedder grinned at the chagrined face of Sergeant Peabody on the sidewalk. Peabody, however, did not remain on the sidewalk. He jumped into the street and began waving and yelling at a taxi a block away.

"He'll only follow," said Jim Walker.

"Yeah, but he can't listen to what we talk about."

"I don't see what else there is to talk about," Walker said testily. "The gun business is out. That policeman knows why I wanted to buy those guns from Weisbecker."

"He's only guessing. He doesn't know that you *don't* have a gun collection at home. You'll have to get a few guns somewhere else. Underwood—"

"Underwood's no particular friend of mine," said Walker. "I know him, but that's about all. He's pretty well fixed, and I doubt whether money alone could persuade him to part with any of his collection."

Vedder looked down at his hands. "Well," he said. "How about Canfield? He—"

"No!" snapped Walker. "I wouldn't be obligated to Canfield for anything in the world. I don't like the man, that's all."

Vedder nodded carelessly. Then he said, suddenly: "By the way, did Mrs. Walker go home?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't she go home? I had my chauffeur take her home in the limousine. No sense of her traipsing down to Chinatown, is there?" Walker looked angrily at Vedder.

Vedder shook his head. "Uh-huh. I think I'll leave you somewhere around here—if I can shake off Peabody. If you're going straight home, it won't hurt to have him tail you; but I've got some things I want to do. A couple of blocks down, there's a subway kiosk. I'll have the taxi turn the corner, pop out and duck down into the subway. Peabody's far enough behind so he won't be able to see me, if I move quick."

Vedder instructed the driver where to make the turn. The stunt worked out well. The moment the cab turned the corner, Vedder bounced out and shot for the subway entrance. He went down three steps at a time, then proceeded more leisurely to the turnstiles. He waited there a moment or two, but Peabody did not show up.

He dropped a nickel in the turnstile and went inside. A local train was just pulling into the station.

Vedder rode uptown to Ninety-sixth Street, then climbed to the street and walked to Roscoe Underwood's residence.

The butler who answered his ring at the door. looked at him in surprise. "Mr. Underwood has retired, I believe," he said stiffly.

"Tell him it's the man who was here earlier this evening—the detective!" Vedder neglected to insert the word "private" before detective.

Underwood hadn't retired, but he was in a dressing gown. He frowned at Vedder. "So you're a detective. I half suspected as much when you were here before. What can I do for you?"

"That gun I was asking you about—the Jesse James one that was stolen from you—it's the weapon that killed Adam Lord this afternoon."

Underwood did not seem surprised. "Indeed? I shouldn't wonder. Adam Lord was a scoundrel. I suppose you know that?"

"We've gathered as much. But, Mr. Underwood, why haven't you communicated with the police about that gun?"

"Why should I?" Underwood asked. "I'm not a policeman. I saw no reason for getting involved in a murder case."

Vedder let that one pass. He said: "Look, Mr. Underwood, you bought that gun originally from Adam Lord, didn't you?"

Roscoe Underwood glared at Vedder. "Yes. And it's quite likely that he stole it back, intending to resell it to some other collector."

That was an idea that hadn't occurred to Vedder before. He mulled the thing over in his mind, but finally shook his head. "The gun's too well known. Even Sergeant Peabody, down at headquarters, knew its record. I guess just about every other collector knows about it."

"They might," Underwood conceded. "And for that reason, Lord would have found it difficult to resell the gun. Most everyone knew that I'd bought it from him originally. But—in Lord's case, the thing was a family heirloom. I suppose by this time you've discovered that Lord's grandfather had been a friend of Jesse James?"

"He was killed in the Lawrence, Kansas, massacre, I believe."

Underwood nodded. "He was one of two guerrillas who stayed in Lawrence. The citizens of that town dragged the bodies up and down the streets behind horses, then turned them over to some Negroes who burned them partially. The charred corpses lay in a ravine for months."

Vedder grimaced. "From what I've read, they deserved it. I understood the guerrillas murdered almost two hundred men and boys during that massacre."

"That was war," Underwood said. "The Kansans did as much in Missouri."

Vedder looked thoughtfully at Roscoe Underwood, then nodded. "Sorry to have bothered you

this late in the evening. I just wanted to clear up the business about the gun."

Underwood did not summon the butler, but suddenly he was in the doorway, and Vedder found himself being ushered out of the house.

Outside, he looked around to see that Jake, who had a habit of being around at the wrong times, was not present. Seeing no one in the block, he walked briskly to Madison Avenue, then turned south one block and went into a drugstore. After looking up the telephone number, he called the Beaumont. He asked to have Mr. Weatherford paged and cursed mildly when the operator insisted on a second nickel before he finally heard Bobcat's voice.

"I just got here," Bobcat said. "Peabody was out and I had to wait around for him. He was kinda cagy, too—"

"Yes," said Vedder dryly, "I think I know why. Did you get anything out of him?"

"Some. The dope on the gun. Jesse didn't give it to Greg Cummings, at all. He gave it to Adam Lord—did you get that name? Lord was killed—"

"At Lawrence, Kansas."

"How d'you know?" Bobcat asked in an annoyed tone.

"I'm psychic. Go ahead. Adam Lord was killed in Kansas in 1863. Now, how did Greg Cummings get the gun?"

"Peabody says he must have taken it off Lord after he was killed. Anyway, he had it in Mexico when he was knocked off, himself. A fellow named Bonniwell took it, then, and he kept it for a long time, when he sold it to Adam Lord, Jr., who was our Adam Lord's father. Got that straight?"

"I have—except how Peabody knows all this."

Bobcat chuckled. "Oh, he's a nut on that stuff. Got all sorts of histories and biographies."

A gleam came to Vedder's eyes. He said: "All right, Bobcat. Now, look—that mug who pounced on me earlier in the evening got on my trail again. I think I lost him around Grand Central, but I've got a hunch he's going to show up again. I'm going over to Gracie Square from here—an apartment house called the Muncie. I want you to stick around outside. If you can, pick up a piece of gas pipe. Keep your eye peeled for a guy who's built like Tony Galento. If he comes anywhere near you, give him a massage with the gas pipe." Vedder considered telling Bobcat about his encounter with Sergeant Peabody. But if Peabody had not bothered to tell Bobcat about it, Vedder could not see where he could gain anything by it.

He hung up and left the drugstore. Outside, he walked a block to a taxi stand. Ten minutes later he paid off the cab in front of the Muncie Apartments on Gracie Square. The doorman demurred at announcing him to Mr. Canfield at such a late hour, but Vedder gave him a quick glimpse of his shield and the doorman put through the call.

He nodded, and Vedder rode up in the elevator to Canfield's floor.

IX.

Canfield was wearing a smoking jacket; his hair was rumpled and he yawned.

"Now what?" he asked crossly.

"Sorry to bother you this late, Mr. Canfield, but it seemed important and I didn't want to wait until morning. When I was here earlier this evening, you told me you collected Americana—books as well as guns. I was wondering if you had any stuff on the Civil War in the West."

"Yes, of course, but"—Canfield looked annoyed—"this is hardly the time to start poring over books."

"Maybe you won't have to look far. It's about the Lawrence, Kansas, massacre, in 1863."

Canfield brightened. "What did you want to know about it? I'm quite well posted on that particular incident."

"I understand Quantrell only lost two men at Lawrence. That must have been quite a fight—"

"It wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter. There was no resistance at all. There were only a few soldiers in the town—recruits, that is—and Quantrell's men shot them down first thing; rode down their tents, in fact, as they slept. They never had a chance to fire a shot."

"Then how were those two guerrillas—Skaggs and Lord—killed?"

"Because they didn't leave with the rest of the outfit. Most of Quantrell's men got drunk when they broke open the stores and helped themselves to whatever they fancied. That happened to be whiskey, in most cases. Quantrell left the town in a hurry and had a hard time rounding up his men. Larkin Skaggs and Adam Lord were too busy looting—or too drunk—to go with Quantrell. Anyway, they were left behind. Naturally, they were killed, for some Union troops came up right after Quantrell left, and Senator Jim Lane raised a posse of Lawrence men to go after the guerrillas."

Vedder smacked his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "Then," he exclaimed, "Greg Cummings couldn't have taken the gun from Lord's body! Because Lord wasn't killed until after Cummings had gone off with Quantrell and the rest of the band."

Stuart Canfield stared in astonishment at Sam Vedder. "What the devil!" he cried. "Are you trying to change history?"

"No, I'm just trying to get this gun business straightened out in my mind."

"But what difference does the gun make? Lord could have given it to Cummings earlier in the day, or maybe he took it from Lord when the latter was drunk. For that matter, it's not too certain

exactly how and when Lord was killed. He might have been killed while the guerrillas were still in town. Remember, there was a lot of confusion in that town, what with most of the houses going up in smoke and almost two hundred men and boys being butchered. The first anyone even knew that Lord was a guerrilla was when they found his body after the troops came. They took some letters and papers from his clothes which—"

"Whoa!" said Vedder. "Now, *you're* trying to change history."

"No, I'm not. That part of it is anyone's guess—as are the exact details of the death of half the people killed that day. As I said, the confusion must have been terrific."

Vedder nodded thoughtfully. Then he squinted at Stuart Canfield and said suddenly: "Mr. Canfield, I've got a theory; it may be as screwy as hell, but it's a theory just the same. Suppose that wasn't Adam Lord who was killed in Lawrence? I've read the dope about that affair, myself, and I know the guerrillas didn't gather until a couple of days before they went to Kansas. And on the way, they picked up a bunch of Confederate recruits who went along with them. Get the idea?"

Stuart Canfield stared at Vedder. "You mean you think someone else took Adam Lord's identity and was killed?"

Vedder shrugged. "Well, I can't swallow that story about Cummings getting Lord's gun. Lord wouldn't be giving away a gun that day, drunk or sober. Not even if he had an extra gun. I've seen pictures of those guerrillas and they had as many as five or six guns in their belts."

"Speaking of pictures," said Stuart Canfield, "that reminds me. I've got a book here in which there are pictures of a number of guerrillas. I believe—yes, I believe there's one of the original Adam Lord. I'll show it to you."

He moved across the room to a bookshelf and studied the backs of the old volumes. After a moment, he exclaimed and pulled down an aged volume. He took it to a table and began riffling the pages. Vedder crowded up to his elbow to look with Canfield. After a moment Canfield stopped at a page on which there were several old line portraits. "Here!" he exclaimed. "Look at these."

Vedder leaned over and put both hands on the book to hold the pages open. Stuart Canfield stepped back—and then said:

"Very good, Mr. Vedder!"

Even before he turned his head, a cold shiver began to race up Vedder's spine. When he finally turned he looked into the muzzle of a Frontier Model .45—a tremendous gun that had been oiled and looked as lethal as a cannon!

It was no more dangerous-looking, however, than Stuart Canfield's face. The wealthy collector's eyes were slitted and glittering; muscle stood out in bunches on his jaws.

"You're very good, Mr. Vedder," he repeated. "You made only one mistake—coming here with your theories."

Vedder groaned. "I figured you for the business, but I couldn't figure a motive. With your dough—"

"How do you suppose I got my money?"

"From your old man. You inherited it. And he inherited it."

"From my grandfather, Amos Canfield, who was at Lawrence, Kansas, in August, 1863. He owned a couple of sections of land around Westport, which became Kansas City."

"Only he wasn't Amos Canfield," Vedder said, softly. "That's it—isn't it?"

Stuart Canfield's lips curled in a sneer. "You couldn't prove that, but you could sound off and someone who *could* prove it might hear."

"Then there are Canfields living—descendants of the real Canfield?"

Canfield nodded. "I don't mind telling you—now. Amos had a nephew who would have been his heir. All right, I'll tell you the whole family secret. Amos was killed at Lawrence, yes, by Adam Lord. Lord was in Amos' house when Quantrell left the town. He knew what would happen if he came out on the streets as a guerrilla. So he killed Amos Canfield and changed clothes. And Lawrence citizens found a body with unrecognizable features—and papers in his pockets, proving he was Adam Lord, a Missourian.

"Amos Canfield was gone, but that wasn't unusual. Half of the remaining citizens of Lawrence had gone with the soldiers in pursuit of Quantrell. Some of them didn't come back. Amos Lord, alias Amos Canfield, made his appearance in Westport after the war. He discovered that he owned some very desirable property. Westport was booming then; everybody was a stranger to everybody else. Lord had taken some papers from the man he had killed at Lawrence, which enabled him to pass himself as Amos Canfield—"

"So your grandfather was actually Adam Lord," Vedder said, "which makes you a blood relative of Adam Lord, III. I suppose he wanted to take advantage of the relationship?"

"He wanted," said Canfield, "half of my inheritance. And if I didn't give it to him he intended to put certain documents—that he had accumulated over a period of years—before the Kansas Canfields. Naturally, I killed him."

"Naturally," said Vedder. "And you did it with your grandfather's Colt."

Canfield gestured with the Frontier Model. "Just as I'm going to kill you with Wild Bill Hickok's old Frontier Model."

Vedder frowned. "You wouldn't dare—not here! That gun'd make a noise like a cannon."

"Oh, I'm not going to do it here. In a little while a man's coming here. He telephoned, just before you arrived, that he was on the way."

"Jake?" Vedder asked. "I gave him the slip at Grand Central. He's been on my trail all evening."

"You won't give him the slip again," said Canfield.

The door buzzer whirred and Canfield grinned sardonically. "Come in!" he called.

Vedder heard a door open in the next room; heard footsteps and then—Evelyn Walker came into Canfield's gun room.

Canfield's eyes popped wide in astonishment, and for an instant the huge gun in his hand wavered.

"Evelyn!" he gasped.

Evelyn Walker's hand went to her mouth. "Stuart! What—"

"That's him," cried Vedder. "The man who killed Adam Lord!"

Stuart Canfield's mouth twisted in agony. "Evelyn, why did you come here at this time of the night?"

Evelyn Walker stared at Canfield, then shifted her wide eyes to Vedder. "I don't understand. What is the meaning—"

"He framed you for Lord's murder, Mrs. Walker," Vedder said, quickly. "He wanted you to—"

That was as far as he got. Stuart Canfield lunged forward and swung at Vedder with the long-barreled Frontier Model. Vedder tried to leap back, but the edge of the muzzle clipped him on the chin. He went backward to the floor, taking an end table with him.

He looked up into the contorted face of Stuart Canfield. "You—" Canfield spat at him. "I've a good notion to give it to you, right here and now. You've spoiled everything!"

Evelyn Walker cried out in horror. "Stuart! What are you talking about? What's the meaning of this?"

Stuart Canfield turned on Mrs. Walker in savage fury. "You fool, why'd you have to come here at this time of night?"

"Jim," Evelyn Walker said. "Jim wanted to buy several of your guns—or borrow them, at least." Her eyes went to Vedder, who was sitting on the floor.

Vedder finished for her. "Mrs. Walker got her fingerprints on that Navy Colt in Adam Lord's apartment. Jim Walker thought it would be a good idea to start a gun collection so he could tell the police that gun—with his wife's fingerprints on it—had been stolen from him. What he wanted to do, of course, was break your frame-up of Mrs. Walker."

"I didn't frame you!" Canfield snarled at Evelyn Walker. "I knew you were in his apartment. You came there before I could get away. But I didn't think you were fool enough to touch the gun. I . . . I even took away that letter."

Evelyn Walker's lips moved soundlessly for a moment. Then she shuddered and made another effort to speak. "So it *was* you, Stuart. I . . . I never dreamed. I thought . . . Jim—"

"Jim knows you came here?" Stuart Canfield snapped.

Vedder tried to catch her eyes, but she was facing Canfield. She made an impatient gesture. "Of course not. He doesn't even know I left the house."

Vedder groaned as he saw Canfield's jaws settle again into determined lines. Before anyone could say anything more, there were three quick buzzes on the doorbell.

Vedder heard Bobcat's voice, protesting to someone. He blinked his eyes shut in hopeless surrender. When he opened them Bobcat was being pushed into the room by Jake, who outweighed Bobcat almost two to one. Bobcat's mouth was bleeding slightly.

"Jake!" cried Stuart Canfield.

Jake made a clucking sound with his tongue. "Old home week, huh, boss? This monkey here's a pal of the bird on the floor. He tried to conk me downstairs with a blackjack; so I brung him along."

"That's three, now," groaned Canfield.

"Three what, boss?"

Canfield gestured with the Frontier Model. "All three of them. They . . . they've got to be—"

"A dame?" Jake exclaimed. "Say, I never knocked off no dame."

Evelyn Walker sat down heavily in a red leather easy-chair. Her face became the color of ashes.

Canfield said: "They've all got to go, or I'm sunk."

"You're sunk, anyway, Canfield," said Vedder. "My boss knows about you."

"You're lying," Canfield retorted. "He'd have come with you if he'd known."

Bobcat said suddenly: "It's getting late. If you're going to do something—"

All eyes, including Vedder's, suddenly went to Bobcat. Vedder looked at his little side-kick with narrowed eyes. Bobcat almost never claimed attention. A warning bell rang in Vedder's brain. Bobcat was up to something. He wanted Vedder to be on the alert.

Bobcat glowered at Jake and took a step to the right. "How're you going to get us all out of here, you big lummox?"

Jake snarled and reached for Bobcat. The latter jabbed out with his right hand—and there was a sharp explosion!

Blood spurted from Jake's face, and he screamed in agony! He began toppling forward. Little Bobcat ducked, caught the big man as a shield and by a tremendous effort whirled him sideward to protect himself from Stuart Canfield.

Canfield, caught completely by surprise, jerked the Frontier Model about to cover Jake's broad

back. He saw that he would have to shoot through his henchman in order to hit little Bobcat, and hesitated.

That gave Vedder a sliver of a chance. Already on his knees, he lunged forward, toward Stuart Canfield. Canfield saw him coming and jerked the Frontier Model around. Vedder was in midair by that time, making a flying tackle for Canfield's knees.

The Frontier Model exploded with a thunder that rocked the entire room! A hot needle creased Vedder's shoulder almost at the instant the shoulder collided with Stuart Canfield. Canfield went over backward. He hit the floor with so much force that the Frontier Model was knocked from his hand. Vedder swarmed all over him. Canfield was already groggy, but Vedder caught his head in both of his hands, picked it up and banged it on the floor. He repeated the process three times. And the last two times Canfield didn't even feel it.

Bobcat chortled. "Wait'll I tell Peabody about this!"

Vedder turned. For a moment he stared at the huddled figure of Jake on the floor, then he lifted his eyes to the stunned, horrified face of Evelyn Walker. Finally, he looked at Bobcat. Bobcat winked at him, stabbed out with his right hand and a small black object popped into his hand.

"A sleeve gun," he said. "With a harness that actually works. Peabody showed it to me when he bragged about his collection; so I borrowed it from him."

Vedder shook his head in bewilderment. "Then why the devil did you let Jake beat you up, downstairs?"

"Because you were up here too long, Sam," Bobcat replied. "The layout looked screwy to me, and I wanted to see what was going on, especially after the da—after Mrs. Walker breezed into the place."

Vedder climbed heavily to his feet and moved toward Evelyn Walker. "Well, Mrs. Walker," he said, "are you satisfied? With the day's work, I mean?"

She shuddered. Then she drew a deep breath and suddenly got to her feet. She took a last look at the unconscious form of Stuart Canfield.

"I am," she said. "And you can tell Captain Bligh that there'll be an additional check in the mail."

Her head went up, her shoulders straightened and she walked out of the room. Vedder looked after her.

"Nice," he said. "But I prefer them less promiscuous—like Emma Todd."

Bobcat clucked and spread his arms wide. The sleeve gun disappeared up his sleeve. "Speaking of guns, which we weren't, Sergeant Peabody claims the Navy Colt is a phony. It couldn't have been owned by Jesse James, on account of Jesse James didn't become a guerrilla until after Adam Lord, I, was dead."

"Then Lord, II, was a liar," Vedder snorted. "Well, that makes it a perfect score for the Lords —all of them, past and present." He looked down at Stuart Canfield. "Even those who changed their names."

THE END.

THE MONSTER

by STEVE FISHER

"Am I A Murderer?" wrote the Thing. Read this dreadful document on crime and decide for yourself.

I returned from Lisbon by Clipper two months ago. The journey had been rough, there was a forty-eight-hour delay at Horta, another at Bermuda, and I was delighted when we at last came down at LaGuardia Field. But I do not like New York much and I was unable to make up my mind whether to stop over for a few days in the city visiting friends, or travel on by Sky Sleeper to the West coast.

After my luggage had been examined, I checked it and strolled into the air terminal. There were Mainliners leaving every hour and I had ample time to decide whether I'd catch one of them. I sat down at a counter, ordered coffee, and flipped the pages of a fact detective magazine. I became mildly interested in one of the cases and, shoving back my felt hat, opened my topcoat and sat reading it.

I was scarcely conscious of the man who took a seat beside me. But when I glanced up in the Coffee Shop mirror, I saw his good-humored Irish face. It was George McLash. His skin was reddish, his eyes shone blue, and his hair had turned white. He put his derby on the counter beside him, chuckling at the wonderful joke that he was sitting next to me and I didn't know it yet.

"George!"

"Hello, mister!" He shook my hand, smiling broadly. "How's it feel being back in the U. S. A.?"

"Swell," I said. "You're looking good, George."

"Thanks. It's the soft life down at headquarters, I guess." He bit the end off a cigar, lit up. "We get a list of Clipper passengers radioed to us. When I saw your name, I damn near jumped out of my skin." He puffed at the cigar. "I wrote you, you know. Two or three letters." He paused. "Well, post cards, really," he added, grinning. "You never answered, though."

"Hell, I never got them!"

"That's what I figured. I didn't have your right address, and with the war in Europe and all, I guessed that they never got to you. I kind of expected you'd be coming back when the war broke out. Then I looked for you again after France fell."

"I was in Spain," I said. "Of course, some of it wasn't nice; the aftermath of the civil war. But I'd rented a lovely villa outside of Barcelona, and it was always possible to get food when you had the money to pay for it. Then something occurred, and I . . . I decided to come back."

"To the land of T-bone steaks," George said. "I don't blame you. Two and a half years is a helluva time to be away from America. Did you bring your wife with you?"

I glanced at my nails. "She . . . she was killed in an air raid, George."

"In Spain?" he asked, incredulously

I shook my head. "We were visiting London when the German air blitz started." I shrugged. "One of those things. She'd gone to a shelter. I was tired of running out every five minutes and stayed in the hotel room. The shelter was hit."

"Oh," he said, "I'm sorry."

"It's—all right. I returned to the villa. But it wasn't the same. I thought I'd make a go of it, but I'm rather afraid the romance of war didn't appeal to me any more. Then there was a food shortage. That decided me. I would have been home sooner if it wasn't for my book."

"A new book?" he asked.

I nodded. "'Psychosis of Massacre.' A little six-hundred-page tome. My most ambitious work. It's a study of the effects of war on the individual." I smiled ruefully. "You see, George, I temporarily abandoned my clinical research on crime and its causes for a rather heavy thesis on its successor—mass murder." I poured fresh coffee from the silver container. "Anyhow, I wasn't aware you knew I'd married again."

"Oh, you hear those things," he said.

"Sure. I suppose. How've things been over here?"

"Good," he said. "I'm a captain now."

"Homicide?"

"Yeah. Still homicide." He dumped cigar ashes. "Sold an article to one of those fact detective books the other month." He nodded toward my magazine.

I laughed. "Still trying to write!"

"Yeah," he said gloomily. "The boys down at Centre Street say I'm an awful flop at it. But I keep trying." He looked up. "That's why I've always admired you, mister. I'd say you were just about the country's top crime analyst."

"Well, hardly the top," I said modestly.

It returned to my mind the pleasant memories of the long winter nights that George McLash and I had pored through police files, discussed and argued crime; those early-morning hours when we sat in the audience at the police line-up. George stoutly maintained that criminals ran to types. He insisted that he could tell by studying the features of a man whether or not he was a criminal, and moreover, with closer observation—of particularly the eyes—he could define the type of crime he would be most likely to commit—all the way from murder, rape and arson right down through to crap shooting on a city sidewalk.

We disputed the theory for months. In my book "Crime and Consequence"—one of my first efforts—I had stated emphatically that there are no set types. I had gone to great pains to show full-page photos of vicious murderers. "I could have spotted 'em," George always said. So I'd show him a group picture in a fact detective magazine, hold my hand over the caption below, and defy him to pick the killer from the sheriff or police officer. But George would never rise to the bait. "Those pictures are too indistinct. They're full length, and the face is too small for a study of the features. In the flesh, or in a clear, full-face portrait, I'm sure I could bat with fair accuracy."

That argument was never ended. But the reason George really liked me was mercenary. He was a success as a police officer but he felt he was an unarrived author. He wanted to do serious articles on crime and criminals, and because I had written a few books on the subject, he imagined I could help him.

In my own studies of crime, George, in return, was able to get me entree to prisons, executions, autopsies, closed trials, and the like; so I played him along. Sometimes I even rewrote a script for him and sold it to a literary magazine. He was unaware of my ghosting job and after he'd say: "Hey, look, they've changed the words around."

"Magazines often do that," I'd say.

So, from this, to the mutual welfare of us both, sprang a genuine friendship. Whenever, in the course of his work, George could turn up an oddity that would make interesting case history for one of my books, he'd go through official hell and high water to see that it got into my hands. He put his derby on his head now, and shoved it back.

"Staying in town?"

"I haven't decided."

"It'd be nice to have one of our talks again," he said. "But if you've got to go, I guess it's no soap."

I thought it over. "Do you have anything that'd make a lay-over in New York profitable?"

"I dunno. We got a guy locked up that did a triple murder in Harlem."

"Hopped up?"

"Yeah."

"That kills it."

George nodded. "There's a woman in the death house that slayed her two kids."

"Was she hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Lukewarm," I said. "A half page or so in *Rogue's Gallery*." *Rogue's Gallery* is an anthology of American murders, case histories, pictures and commentary, which, with the collaboration of my publishers who canvass files throughout the country, we bring out once every five years. You've probably seen it. It sells at three seventy-five a copy.

"That's what I figured it for," George said helpfully. He was a nice, warm-hearted guy that way. He looked up suddenly. "Oh, say! I nearly forgot. It's a couple of years old. But I got one that'd make a whole chapter, maybe. Honey of a freak case. Just the kind you always look for."

"What is it?"

"Arson and murder double-barreled. Oh, a sweet case, mister! Really a sweet one!"

"Was the guy insane, doped or anything?"

"No, that's what makes it! He's nuts now, of course. They've got him in a padded cell. He's raving. He was wandering around the Bowery for six months, scaring everybody to death."

"How do you mean?"

"His face. It's swollen, bloated—scorched. He's humped over; the skin on his hands is all eaten away. His clothes were ragged. He's a monster. But the thing is, before all this happened, he was sane. He used to be a two-bit writer. Wrote for trade papers, and like that. Did a few greeting cards on the side. Like me, he must've always had an ambition to write a novel some day. All those guys do, you know."

"Yes—so?"

"So, while he was wandering around the Bowery, living in this flop house and that, he wrote a manuscript. It's scrawled on lined paper—nickel pads. A whole bunch of them. I guess the guy was going nuts while he wrote it. But it's all gospel. Every detail checks. Every word is true. That was probably what was making him nuts. Because he got worse and worse. The manuscript was in his room when we picked him up. We've still got it down at headquarters."

"How long has the man been in an asylum?"

"Couple years. Like I told you. Some of the best psychologists in the country have been around to look at him."

My interest picked up. "Could we possibly see him tonight?"

"Why not? He's right here on Long Island. We could take a drive out and get your bags on the way back."

"And can I see the manuscript afterward?"

"Sure. I think I might even be able to get you a copy of it for publication."

We left the air terminal together.

It was nearly ten o'clock when we sighted the gray stone walls of the asylum. George stopped at the gate. He had to phone in to the main building before we were allowed to enter. In a few minutes we were moving down a cold cement corridor. A nurse sat at a desk in a small well of light, reading. "There's a gentleman here interested in seeing Sam," George said.

She nodded, and rose. Her face was pallid, and her eyes were a light gray. We followed her to the end of the floor, and two guards in gray uniforms suddenly appeared. The nurse left us, and the guards directed us up a short stairway. It was dark, and outside you could hear the sound of the wind. From another floor, one of the inmates was moaning and crying. The guards stopped in front of a cell. I reached out and touched one of the padded bars.

"Don't," George warned.

"It may not be safe," a guard whispered.

A flashlight was turned into the cell. I stared, and then I gasped. I could feel the sudden thud of my heart. The Thing was curled up in a corner, its face toward us. The skin was twisted, burned, and bloated. The head was grotesque, utterly without shape; its hairless dome was as white as a bleached skull. Its hands were huge, clumsy knots.

I felt a spasm of sheer horror, and in the same moment pity. While we watched, the Thing opened its eyes. It made small whimpering sounds. Then, clumsily, it started getting up. It loped toward us, like an animal. It was as though we were in a museum staring at some hideous creature of another age. The body was so evilly contorted that I felt it a sacrilege to look upon it. The eyes stared unblinking into the light.

Suddenly, the Thing leaped forward, plunged at us. Shrieking wildly, it tore at the bars. It shook them, screaming a terrible gibberish. I was sick with fear and nausea. I grasped at George's sleeve; even he had gone pale. I needed the support of his arm getting out of there.

I wasn't able to speak until we were outside again, in the car.

"It was awful!"

George nodded. "He's been getting gradually worse. They say he'll die soon. When he was picked up two years ago, he was tame as a kitten. He even told us where to find the manuscript he'd written."

"Murderer, you say?"

"In a way, yes."

"I must have the manuscript," I said. "My God, it's exactly what *Rogue's Gallery* needs. Have you extra copies?"

"Yes, we've had some made. If you want to come down to Centre Street I'll let you read one."

We picked up my baggage, and I left it at a hotel. By one a. m. we were in the Centre Street Station. A cup of coffee in front of me, George and the other detectives playing draw poker at the other end of the room, I sat and read a copy of the manuscript written by that hideously deformed idiot.

This is the text:

AM I A MURDERER?

I will start with the house. It was the house which was the beginning of everything. It was the ending, too, and I see it now as a symbol of all that occurred. I do not mean to say the same events might not have taken place in another house, for I have come to believe that the crime and the punishment were inevitable.

It was an unholy plan, destined, plotted and foregone from the moment I first met Mabel. Gaudy, flighty, silly and social—if you can imagine anyone named Mabel being in Cholly Knickerbocker's column. I met her at a charity bazaar, and I guess she dazzled me. A lot of dough, big cars and servants can dazzle anybody. It must have been that, because Mabel was no dream. She was eight years older than myself, not too pretty, not very affectionate, and *dumb!* Yes, I said dumb! Only I didn't think so when I met her. She was rich, so, cluck that I am, I naturally thought she must be smart. I don't know how I came to figure that way. Maybe because I never had any money. Maybe because the day I met her I'd just stood two hours in a tailor shop while my gray pants were rewoven. They'd worn through in the seat.

I'd been getting along the best I could, writing articles for *Leathercraft, Business Grosses,* some cheesy little stories for Sunday-school papers, and risque magazines. Yeah. If they didn't sell the Sunday-school markets, I just sexed them up and peddled them sometimes to *Hot Romances.* I also got myself a neat profit a few months before every big holiday by knocking off greeting cards.

I've really done some fine greeting cards. That's silly, but I really have.

I'd like to put down one or two of them here, but I guess this isn't the place for them. Even I'm not that dumb. But I guess nobody but the publisher'll ever know I wrote those cards. You don't get any by-line. Sitting here, I can remember the verses very well. But they'd just clutter this up. This is maybe the last thing I'll ever write, and I don't want to mess it up. I want to make it as good as I can.

So, like I say, I met Mabel, and all that dough and swank knocked me for a loop. When she took a shine to me, I was so excited I didn't know what to do. She invited me to her apartment on Park Avenue for dinner. After dinner, we went into the library and talked about writing and writers; about the new books. I read the *Times* and *Tribune* book sections every Sunday. I used to read every review and memorize the best-seller lists. So I could talk like a critic.

Mabel had the butler bring in some wine, and I began talking about how I wanted to do a great book some day; I drank some more wine and I was tossing around names like Hemingway and Steinbeck. I really believed it, you see. I was going to soar some day, carry on where Thomas Wolfe had left off. Mabel was enthralled. You could see it by the look in her eyes.

That should have been the tip-off. If I'd had any sense I would've known right then and there. Mabel was one of these janes that's going to *do* something with life. Uplift the world. And if they can attach themselves to a coming writer, help him, live through the poverty and woe and make him famous—"inspire him," is the way Mabel put it—then they are in clover. No matter what the hardship may be, they are able to live vicariously the life of the artist they are goading on and on to ultimate greatness.

Mabel had never met a writer. All this talk, famous names, my own future, made her dizzy. She didn't know that if you give a drink to any cluck who writes, his secret little ego will make noises like that. No. For all she knew, a gem had been uncovered. Fate had delivered into her empty and avid hands a genius. What if I were poor? No matter! No matter! Victory would only be the sweeter when it came. What if my clothes were shabby, my face gaunt? I had a garret, no doubt. I wrote day and night. I was consumed with the fire of a literary god. I ate miserable things. Cheese and crackers.

The truth was, I ate just like anybody else, in Childs or the Automat, and I had a cheap—but respectable—hotel room off Broadway. But you couldn't sell that to Mabel. She saw me for a potent giant. Her soul quivered in the flame of my vitality. Here, at last, into her drab—Park Avenue, Stork Club, Newport News—life an artist had been delivered.

Mabel's folks had been killed in a plane crash. She was thirty-two years old and worth millions of dollars. But she moved only in her own top-flight stratum and because she was dull, a gad-fly that'd talk an arm off you, and appeared to be anything but romantic to the men in her set, she was left alone a great deal. Her life *was* dull. At thirty-two, her only friends were women twice her age who trotted about town gathering sweaters for the boys at Fort Dix, attending teas, séances, and shopping for precious antiques in Madison Avenue gyp emporiums.

But here, suddenly, like a stroke of divine fate, was Purpose in Life. She rambled on about Moon and Six Pence. An artist who had sacrificed all to go to the South Seas and paint. "There," she said, a little shrilly, "there was courage!"

She spoke bitterly of her millions, how money could stifle the soul; the curse of Capitalism. She was so sick of it. "I'm so *sick* of it, Sam!" She wanted to get away from it all. My life fascinated her. The bleakness. The bare existence. Never sure of the next check. The endless work toward an Ideal.

I became her passion, her toy, her obsession. We met every day. Once she confessed she could not sleep, thinking of the future that lay in store for me. "How very fortunate you are, Sam, to know exactly what you want to do in life! To have a goal for which to strive! Oh, my dear, do you realize how important that is? All else in life is insignificant!"

She stirred strange ambitions in my heart. I listened to her, and marveled. She sold me on myself. First thing I knew I half believed her. I tried to write a story for a big magazine. It was atrocious. But Mabel wept over it. Tears ran down her face, and she laughed with wild joy. When I could not sell the story, she had it printed and put in a special leather binding. She gave copies of it to all the old biddies in whose crowd she traveled. They all thought it was terrific.

"My dear, the boy has no *end* of talent!"

They raved over me, petted me; they gave little teas and I would be the guest of honor. I was a bull in a china shop. It flattered me inside and I liked it. I let my hair grow long. I moved to a garret. And, because I quit writing for the trade magazines, I went broke. I told Mabel.

"There is only one thing we can do," she said; "I see it very clearly now. The road of our lives lies before us. We must get married, Sam. I will put all my money in trust until you have made your way! I will keep only enough to buy us a small house in White Plains. After that, it will be up to you to scrape together a living for us like any true artist must before he arrives."

I protested.

"No," she said, a light in her eyes, "any other way would only be a vulgar sham, don't you see? If you *knew* you could have money at any time you wouldn't work as hard. It would be easier to become discouraged. But if you had nothing to fall back upon. If it was to do or die—"

"But, Mabel—"

"No," she said firmly. "Oh, my dear, I have so long considered this problem! Money disintegrates people. It would decay that fine talent which now burns so strongly in you. Without struggle, you will never become a truly great writer." She smiled nobly. "There must be darkness before the sun.

"I am quite willing to give up everything." She lowered her eyes. "To sacrifice all that I may possess, and start life with you from scratch. I will cook and clean. I will work my fingers to the bone. I will be your inspiration, the guiding light in the background of your career. Destiny is indeed wrought this day. You do not see it now, but you will. You will, my dear!

"We will endure the most bitter poverty, if necessary; and on certain occasions we shall perhaps give parties. And if it should happen that our friends find us in a cold, unheated house, with barely enough to eat—how can they help but see the *true* greatness in that? Hope springs from despair and dire need; and there can be in sacrifice a certain nobleness that will rise above the physical and enter upon a spiritual plane. In such an aura, my dear, you will create prose that will live into immortal posterity!"

"But," I said, "if it becomes really necessary—like if one of us got appendicitis—we *could* get some of your money, couldn't we?"

"No," she said, nearly bursting with her own True Greatness, "if the worst comes, I am very much afraid it will be a charity ward for us. That would be the way of an *honest* artist. And, my dear, you must be that if nothing else! The money will be put in trust with my attorneys, and so long as I am married to you, we will be unable to touch it until you have published your first important novel.

"Then, of course," she said, smiling to herself, "we will no longer need it."

It was silly. But I told you she was *dumb*. She didn't know a damn thing about writers. But I was dumb, too. It was like a bad dream, but I secretly thought if things really *didn't* work out, we'd be able to get the money, one way or another. Not that I wanted to live off her. But that money was her glamour for me, and I couldn't just yet see her detached from it. All this talk was against the glitter of Fifty-second Street, Park Avenue, and the St. Moritz. So I agreed. I was drunk on what she thought was my talent. We sat and plotted what would be the road to fame.

A week later we were married.

That house in White Plains. I don't know what there was about it. It was an old wooden house and it was in bad repair. Mabel had bought it for twenty-five hundred cold cash. It wasn't worth it. She took out every kind of insurance on it you could imagine. "The house is our only asset, you see," she said. She'd somehow been able to get thirty-five hundred dollars coverage by paying extra premiums. She explained the extra valuation by the fact that our furniture would be in the house and "Certain manuscripts which are as yet unwritten."

All of the rest of her money was gone: really frozen. I discovered that—while she was married to me—she couldn't touch it even if it was a matter of life and death. She was *that* cracked on this noble

experiment. "Not until your first serious novel."

The house was awful. A living room laid out like a manger, with some ratty, worn furniture, and dim lights. A dining room that was skinny, and too long. Shaky wooden stairs that wound around to the two cramped little bedrooms of the second floor.

My den. Sure, it had to be a *den*. It couldn't simply be a room where I wrote. My den was one of these second-floor rooms. Up where it'd be quiet. The windows were narrow strips about six inches wide. Three of them. There was only one door and one closet. Of furniture there was a desk, of course, special indirect-lighting lamps, a large studio couch and a waste-paper basket. My old typewriter sat on the desk, and in a bookshelf near enough to reach my arm while I worked were Roget's Thesaurus, the "Rubaiyat"—to get titles out of—Shakespeare complete, a set of Maugham, and the top novels of Bromfield, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Wolfe and Dickens. Whatever gave Mabel the Dickens notion, I don't know.

"Whenever you feel stale," she said, "read a little from the living masters. It'll stimulate you."

"But Dickens and Wolfe are dead!"

"Ah, my dear, but they are contemporary! Don't you agree? Wolfe, of course. There is more argument about Dickens. But I am definitely a Dickens addict. He has such a fine flavor. And Shakespeare is immortal. Admit it, Sam, have I not chosen your collection well?"

She'd go on like that for hours.

How does murder first occur to a man? If this were a motion picture instead of words on paper, I think I would make a montage. This way: close shot of a calendar, the pages which are months dissolving into liquid blobs—like tears—and dropping slowly one by one into the bucket of time. Over all, all the scenes and snatches of dialogue in the montage, the steady click of a typewriter. Perhaps typewritten yellow sheets piling up, piling up, endlessly.

And then Mabel. She'd make a wonderful montage. Before and After. In gradual stages. How she got thinner, her voice sharp and cruel. The way she'd drive me, prod me on, harass me; the way she expected miracles. The hell I had to take every time a manuscript was rejected that she had pronounced—on the day I wrote it—a masterpiece. The foul things she said of editors. The dark, dirty insinuations she made of the corruptness she felt must be in the magazine-publishing business.

But most of all, the way her attitude changed toward me. You see, she was only an Artist-guider, an Inspiration-giver in theory. A hungry belly and housework changed her. Glamour leaped out the window. She'd abuse me. She'd accuse me of having gotten her into this so I could somehow get at her money. She said over and over that I was cheap and artificial and she saw now that I had no talent at all. This is the montage.

She lost thirty pounds. She looked her age on her thirty-third birthday. Her hair was beginning to turn gray. She was a shrew. Her face was worn, etched in sharp, selfish lines. She was impatient for the success that she felt I should have attained months ago. At least, she said, I might have had some encouragement, some indication from an editor; but, alas, there had been none.

When, in sheer desperation for money, I began writing more business articles and Christmas, Easter and birthday jingles, she openly jeered. She declared I was the worst kind of a hack. She reminded me that she had come from a social background, and charged that I had degraded her, dragged her down to my own level.

I'm sure she would have left me but she didn't know how to get out of a marriage which she had advertised, and boasted about, all over New York. She was possessed of a fierce pride. Some women are. She hadn't the moral courage to admit the thing was a failure, and get out. I believe she would have spent the rest of her life tormenting and hounding me for the marriage she now realized was a mistake, but refused to openly admit.

There was no rent to pay, and gradually, from business journals, I began making enough for the other modest expenses. The pressure was off and I was happy. I said to Mabel:

"We can live quietly like ordinary people the way we are now. We've got the house, and I've a fair-enough income. We can raise children, be respected citizens in our community."

She was aghast, actually livid. "What are you talking about?"

"To hell with fame," I said, "it's driving me crazy! I'm lucky enough just to be able to make money writing words on paper, and I'm happy. We won't have to touch any of your dough and I guess that's what you want."

She screamed.

"To *hell* with *fame!* Oh, my God!" She ran into her room, locked the door, and flung herself on the bed. She sobbed all the rest of the day.

I cooked dinner that night, and when she came down to eat it there was a strange, horrible look in her red-rimmed eyes. She announced that I was going to quit writing junk. That I was going to do literary prose only, from now on, even if it meant utter starvation. She said she knew there was that spark in me and she meant to wring it out if she had to kill both of us to do it.

"It's no use," I said. "You can't punch hundred-dollar bills out of a two-bit machine. And that's what I am. Thank God, I realize it." I looked her straight in the eye. "I'm a hack, and I love it!"

I thought she'd scream again.

"You're not," she said. "You're a . . . a . . . Hemingway! It's that you lack *character:* the essential

will to go on! That is a thing I mean to bring to you. Even if I have to drum it into you hour in and hour out!"

She drove me relentlessly. Her burning energy wore me down. I returned to my half-finished novel. I was empty and sick. We went broke again. There was scarcely enough to eat. And all the time she stood over me, over me. Except when I was too exhausted to write another word. Then I'd sleep in the den, she in the bedroom. I could not bring myself to touch her. This is the way those days were. This is a montage.

I don't know how I first got the idea to kill her. It might have come suddenly, the way things do sometimes. Or, it may have been the total of a number of thoughts, of plans half made, of hours spent in impotent rage while she screamed over me, that all at once came together.

But I suddenly knew I was going to murder her. From that moment on nothing could have changed my mind. There was no escape. I was tired of looking for ways. I'd begged her on my knees to leave. She wouldn't. If I walked out of the house she followed me. She made scenes in bars, in the White Plains railroad stations. She was like a mad woman.

Once when I went to a cheap hotel in White Plains she found me, somehow, and dragged me out. She accused me of having had a rendezvous with another woman. She shouted so that everybody on the street could hear.

She was filled with this crazy pride. She couldn't face her friends again unless this project—my date with posterity—came true. She still gave parties for them, and when they came to the house in evening dress, she reveled in our poverty. She was aware that the old biddies were jealous of her noble role and she flaunted her Humble Rags in their faces. When they spoke of charities, she smiled tolerantly, and said: "Sam, here, Sam is my charity!"

I was a man damned!

So I made my plans. It was the most real thing that had happened to me in months and months. It was all quite easy. She was taking trips into town once a week to see a phony prof of some kind. She'd go in her shabby dresses, runs in her stockings, unashamed.

I'd begun knocking out articles in secret to get money. The manuscripts I didn't want her to read I put in an iron strong box under the studio couch. On the day when she went to the city, I gradually bought the things I would need. Not that there was so much. Two gunny sacks of shaved celluloid. An alarm clock I'd taken apart and tinkered with so that, set at a certain hour, it would ignite a tiny spark of fire.

This little infernal machine I put between the two gunny sacks in the basement. Just above, hanging from a water pipe only inches below the kitchen floor, was a *wooden* bucket filled with gasoline.

Do you see it? At the hour I would set, the spark would ignite the contents of those sacks. The flame would soar upward in a hideous burst of yellow. It would touch off the bucket. There would be an explosion, and roaring flames quickly leaping through the house. The bucket, the sacks, everything would be burned: *leaving no traces whatsoever!*

Mabel's room was just above the kitchen and the ceiling was low. The kitchen would burst into flames. The old house would go fast. Mabel's room would become a flaming coffin almost at once. There was a kerosene stove in it and once the fire touched that, there'd be little chance for her to escape.

I'd be in the hall the moment the fire started; and if necessary, if I saw there was a chance she might get out, I'd hit her. I was that desperate. When I was positive of her doom, I'd run from the house.

I'd collect the insurance and it'd be enough to give me a start in life somewhere.

I plotted the thing remorselessly. From the first I felt no qualm of conscience. I waited until the next party. Mabel's friends always brought their own Scotch, in a sort of picnic spirit—because they knew we were poor—and she'd be drinking. She always slept heavily whenever she drank. It was perfect.

The party started. This professor was there. He was a big New York success. A young guy with all kinds of notions about intellectual things. It was plain to see that Mabel was nuts on him. Her novelist illusion had about flagged itself out, and now she was hanging onto every word this guy said.

It stole my thunder. I was no longer the pitied and humble author, and I was glad. About midnight I went into the basement. I set the clock for three a. m. sharp. I brushed past the Ping-pong table, turned off the light, and went upstairs. In the parlor I excused myself—nobody cared, anyway—and climbed the stairs to my den.

I undressed, put on pajamas, walked up and down, smoking cigarettes. I was jumpy as a cat. I lay down on the studio couch. About one a. m. I heard the company leave. There was silence. Then I heard a man's voice downstairs. *He* was still here.

I didn't hear him go out, but Mabel came up the stairs, entered her room, and closed the door. I figured this prof must have left. I tuned in Stan Shaw on the radio, and listened to records. I watched the little dollar Ingersol on my table.

At two o'clock, Mabel's door opened. I'd thought she was in bed. I switched off the radio. Then I heard *his* voice. He was upstairs. He must have been standing in the hall.

"I see you've a Ping-pong table," he said.

Tongues of flame licked up through the floor. I banged until my shoulder was cut deep and bleeding. But the door held!

"Yes," Mabel replied, "Sam and I used to play."

I was frozen. They went downstairs and I could hear their voices through the floor, though I could not make out what they were saying. It got to be two thirty, and I was scared. I thought I'd better go down and turn off the infernal machine. Five minutes later I heard the front door close.

I ran to the narrow, six-inch slat of a window —there were three of them—and looked out. Mabel's bags were packed, and she was climbing into a sleek-looking car with the prof. I shouted, but they didn't hear me.

Then I suddenly realized the house was on fire. *But it was only two thirty-five!* I heard the bucket of gasoline explode. The kitchen was already in flames. I ran to the door of the den. Turned the knob.

The door was locked!

I didn't get it at first. I thought it was some kind of joke. I banged against the door. But it was really locked. I ran to the window. The street was empty. I screamed and shouted. You could never get out through those narrow windows. The ledges between them were thick.

I raced back to the door. Smoke was already billowing up through the floor. The house was burning like a doll house. I'd read of how detectives bang through doorways. I banged until my shoulder was cut open and bleeding. Tongues of flame began to lick up through the warping seams of the floor. But the door held. I kicked at it, slammed at it. It was a thick doorway, and it didn't budge. Someone had simply put a key in it and turned the lock.

I searched for a skeleton key of some kind. I couldn't find any. Futilely, tears running down my face, I pounded at the door. Whole snakes of flame were coming up through the floor now. The

room was roasting hot. Sweat poured off my body. The flames crackled.

Then it was all around me, and I was screaming, trying to hold my hands over my face. It was growing up around me like red grass. Up to my hips. Up past my shoulders. And I was standing in the middle of it, screaming . . . screaming—

I regained consciousness in the hospital. I was in a very dark room, swathed in bandages. The agony was terrible. I was bloated, twisted, burned out of shape. Day after day passed in that darkness. Somehow, miraculously, I'd been able to keep my arm over my eyes, even while I was unconscious, and I was not blind. Firemen, throwing a ladder beside the house, had chopped away those three windows with an ax, and rescued me.

I spent months in the hospital. The expense ate up all of the thirty-five hundred dollars that the insurance company had paid me. Most of the house was demolished; I was too critically burned to be questioned, or even suspected. They didn't believe a man would commit arson and then stand in his own inferno. There was nothing at all left of Mabel's room and they supposed she had been cremated alive.

From that day, no one had heard anything from her!

I couldn't tell the truth to the police without revealing my own murder plan. Penniless, I was at last released from the hospital. I was no longer anything human. People shrank in horror from the sight of me.

I ended up in the Bowery where there are shadows and night lights and derelicts. And I began writing this. I began writing it because I am tormented. Certainly I'd had every intention of committing a murder, but instead, I was caught in it myself. The door of the den had been *deliberately* locked. It was no fumbling mistake *I* had made. Mabel would have been too dumb to do it.

I am tormented, and I think, day by day, I am losing my mind. There are horrible periods when there is only darkness around me. I scream into it, then I am quiet and listen to myself. I hear again the tick of the clock in the infernal machine.

I am tormented. Because there is one thing I must know. I have asked myself the question over and over and I have found no answer: am I a murderer? Or am I the victim? A match touched off the fire twenty-five minutes before my machine would have started it. Am *I* guilty of arson? Am I the murderer of myself? Or am I the victim of someone else's murder? Is plotting a murder the same as committing it?

You see, there is no answer. I am wretched. Each day the agony of my burned skin increases. There are sharp pains in my head. *Am I a murderer?*

I cannot answer.

THE END.

I laid the script on the table. For a moment, I was so numb with horror that I could not move. I glanced at George McLash, engrossed in his card game. Outside, the sound of police sirens silenced as the radio cars approached headquarters. I rose slowly, stiff in every limb. I moved across the room. I was at the door when George looked up.

"Oh—finished?"

I nodded.

"Like it?"

I didn't say anything.

"Too bad Sam's ex-wife died in *London*," he said sarcastically. "In an air-raid shelter, too, while you were in the hotel. Only she was *your* wife then, wasn't she?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said coldly.

"Oh, come now, mister, of course you do. Don't you suppose society people and reporters who knew Mabel in New York saw her in Europe with you?"

"What if they did?"

"Oh, then you admit it?" George said. "Well, no matter. I have the record of her Paris divorce, and a copy of the registration made out the day she married you in Deauville."

I was trembling; cold and trembling. I had gone to such pains, paid such huge bribes, to have those records kept private. It didn't matter, though. I was in the clear and I knew it.

"I figure it this way," George said. "She was sort of tired of being a writer's inspiration, and when you came along with your talk about criminal psychology, why it was a natural thing. Something intellectual, something worth while. And you were *already* a success. She didn't know that you make next to nothing on those books."

"What do you know of the profits?"

"I checked every royalty you ever earned," George said, grinning. "It was easy for you to talk a dumb, flighty dame like Mabel into running away with you. She wouldn't have to face her friends. She'd just vanish. It was the one out she hadn't considered. And she'd get *you* along with it. A successful, *important* husband. It was a wonderful dream come true.

"You arranged your plans in advance. You bought boat tickets for husband and wife on a liner leaving the morning after the party. She gave the party because she knew Sam'd get fed up and go to his room sulking, and probably to bed. That was what he always did before.

"As soon as she thought he was asleep, she'd go upstairs, pack a few things, meet you downstairs, and beat it. The boat left at five a. m., and you were registered under another name."

I watched him. His face had gone cold now.

"But you were worried that Sam would make trouble. Of course, you had no way of knowing Sam would have only shouted with joy to be rid of

her! That's the ironic part. You were afraid he'd throw a monkey wrench into the works somewhere along the line and you wouldn't get your hands on the millions of dollars that belonged to Mabel once Sam was no longer her husband."

"Are you inferring that I married Mabel for her money?"

George said: "Don't do that, mister. You sound so funny. Of course that's why you married her! You didn't have much more than boat fare to Europe. To get back to the night of the party. While Mabel was packing, you wandered around the house. You went down into the basement. The Ping-pong table was here and to fool away time, you bounced a few balls off the walls. That was how you discovered Sam's little murder set-up. The gunny sacks, the bucket of gasoline, *everything*.

"This was just like tossing a nicely arranged murder into your lap. It was too good to resist. You'd been worrying about Sam making trouble all along, anyhow. You calculated quickly. You knew all about murders, and you knew this was perfect. Instead of waiting downstairs, you risked going up to the second floor. You got your hands on the pass key from the bathroom, stuck it in Sam's keyhole, and turned the lock. All of this you did very casually while you mentioned to Mabel you'd seen a Ping-pong table—"

"I mentioned no such thing!"

"But you did lock the door!"

"No."

"You deny it? Listen, parts of fingerprints were found on that key. They were photographed and enlarged. Maybe they match some of your prints. Besides, there were prints on the door of the den. We've got them blown up and on file."

"What if I was up there? What does it prove? I've studied more murder cases than you have. Exactly *what* does it prove?"

"That you locked the door."

"No!"

"Circumstantial," George said. "Backed up by the fact that you ran away with her that night. On the way out, you tossed a match to that pile of stuff in the basement. It was neat."

"You've nothing on me," I said coolly, "neither arson nor murder. Wife stealing, perhaps. Is that a crime, George?"

"You were upstairs, and you locked that door."

"What if I *did?*"

"You locked the door, and locked that guy in. That much we can prove."

"What if I did lock it?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Witnesses heard you admit it."

"What the hell do I care? It isn't murder. The man's still alive! He's confessed to attempted murder and to attempted arson. In the face of that, do you think you can *tie* me into it?"

"You married her," George said, "and once the divorce was granted, you got her dough transferred to a bank in Europe. You never went to London at all. You murdered her in that villa in Spain. Probably buried her in the basement."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen," George said, "why do you suppose I've paid so much attention to you? I've had you spotted for years. I tell you I know types, and I do. When I first met you, your first wife had recently died in Ohio. She'd been moderately wealthy. You were a crime expert. You knew all the angles, all the dodges. You're the Bluebeard type. You've got the eyes, nose, mouth and chin. Why, it's all over you! I knew it the first time I saw you.

"On my vacation I went to Ohio. But you were too smart. I couldn't get a shred of evidence. Only that your wife had died suddenly. So I thought, just for the hell of it, I'd keep watching you. I did you little favors. You see, I was positive you were a woman killer. The deadliest of murderers. It was really an interesting experiment to watch you.

"You slipped out of town with Mabel before I knew what had happened. You were gone a month before I knew it. There you were clever again. War in Europe. Practically impossible to get in touch with you, let alone bring about your arrest. And from knowing you, I know that the way you murdered Mabel in Spain, nobody'll ever be able to prove that, either."

"You're talking like a madman!" I said.

"No. This is personal. I've watched you for years. You'd fled to Europe. I waited for you to return. I had lots of time over here to fix up an air-tight murder case. Tonight, the murderer returned from Lisbon. I was at the airport to meet him."

"Will you stop saying *murderer!* There's no murder here that you can possibly prove!" His insolence made me arrogant.

"You locked the door, though?"

"What if I did? The man's still alive!"

"You admit you locked it, plenty of people heard you, and that's all I need. Because, you see—there were no prints. You may be an eminent crime analyst, but you were too rattled to remember just now that naturally the door would have burned down with the house and there couldn't possibly have been prints!"

"That's an old police trap, George," I said. "I fell into it. But what of it? Since the man isn't dead, there's no murder, and—"

George McLash had nodded, and now a door opened. The creature I had seen at the asylum came in. There was a cop on either side of him. I stared, and then I began to sweat. The Thing had straightened up, was tearing off wax, putty, theatrical make-up. In the dim light of the padded cell, it had been impossible to see this. The idiot was

a hoax. *It* was a homicide detective! I could not take my eyes from him. George was talking again.

"The manuscript, up to the night of the murder, was authentic. We found it in the ashes, in that strong box he'd kept under the studio couch. Every word was just as Sam wrote it. But Sam died in the fire. No one could possibly have rescued him in time."

"But . . . but the rest of it? The description of the fire, the way it said I came up the stairs?"

"I added that myself," George said. "From deductions I'd made after I'd read Sam's original script. I was wrong about you mentioning the Ping-pong table. But you've admitted the rest. You locked a man in to his death! You ignited the fire twenty-five minutes early so that when he saw you leave with Mabel, he wouldn't have time to break down the door or attract the neighbors by shouting! We've got you for murder this time, mister!"

"But I . . . I—"

"I always thought something'd come of my ambition to write," George said. "And I had lots of time while you were in Europe. I once saw a man who'd been horribly burned. That's what gave me the idea to pull the stunt. The tip-off was when I phoned from the asylum gates and told Joe here to go into the cell and wait for us."

"Then you—"

"I collaborated with Sam on the manuscript," George said quietly.

Later, George McLash wrote:

He's in the death house at Sing Sing now. He asked me to lend him the manuscript, and I did. This is what he sent back. He says he cannot understand why he is up there. He knew all about crime, and he was such a careful, exacting murderer. A sort of perfect artist, the kind Mabel always dreamed she'd meet some day.

He says he wanted to do one more book. A biography of his life. But there isn't time. So he has written this instead.

THE END.

KILLER'S CARNIVAL

by EDWARD RONNS

Babe Donegal was back—back from three years in prison, to prove that the most promising rookie of the squad had not turned rat!

I.

The little guy was waiting for Donegal when they let him out. He stood across the street, exposed to the dismal afternoon rain, and watched Donegal hesitate, then come walking through the downpour. A yellow trolley intervened for a moment; then Donegal reached the curb a few feet from where the little guy stood. Donegal would have gone on past him, but the guy spoke suddenly, his voice pouncing:

"How does it feel, Babe? All right?"

Donegal stopped in the rain. "Sure, it feels all right," he said slowly. It didn't feel all right. It felt terrible, this sudden freedom in dreary half-light; but that was his own business. He squinted, trying to see something of the little guy.

He was wearing an expensive pale-green trench coat, darkened about the shoulders by the incessant rain. He must have been waiting a while. His

wide-brimmed hat was pulled low over large, liquid brown eyes. His nose was sharp, his mouth twitchy. His lips were thin and blue with chill. He was not at all embarrassed by Donegal's silent, hostile stare. He said:

"Don't commence by acting stir-nutty, Babe. I'm a pal."

Donegal kept staring at him. "Oh, sure," he gibed. "Everybody's my pal. The people's pal, that's me. They love me."

The little guy stared at the water running in the gutter, as if trying to remember something. "There are a lot of people wanting to see you, Babe. I've got a car around the corner. I'll give you a lift." He put his hand on Donegal's arm.

Donegal brushed it off.

"Copper?" he asked softly.

"Do I look it?"

"Private," Donegal suggested.

"That could be. I'll give you a lift. These people are sort of anxious."

"I haven't time," Donegal said. "I've got a place to go."

The little guy shook his head, very sadly. He looked expensive in his green trench coat. He swiped beaded moisture from his pale upper lip and said: "This isn't a gag, Babe. I'd like to help you. You've got a persecution complex."

"You must have swallowed a textbook, stooge," Donegal taunted.

The little guy was a wag. "I've been readin' a lot. I want to get cultured up."

"Who wants to see me?" Donegal asked.

"Oh, people." He shrugged very elaborately. "Important people."

"Schiller?"

"He's one."

"I'll see Schiller when I'm ready," Donegal told him. "And he'd better duck."

"All right, kid, I'll tell him that. So you don't want a lift?"

"No, I don't want a lift."

The little guy's mouth twitched. The beads of moisture on his upper lip were not entirely due to the rain. His face was sickly gray in the street light. He looked frightened. He shrugged, stared again at the swollen gutter; then he touched Donegal's arm and drifted away.

Donegal stood quite still, looking after him through the drizzling rain. He felt a little worried by the little guy's extreme politeness. No threats; no veiled hints; just a shrug and away.

He shivered suddenly, aware of the sogginess of his prison-made suit. It would shrink in this rain.

Babe Donegal spent two of his precious ten dollars on a taxi, which was a luxury; and when he got out and looked around the street, he was a little surprised to see that nothing had changed.

Police headquarters looked the same as it always did, with the two green globes shining softly through the drifting rain. There was the same big stone shield over the doorway, looking dark and oppressively heavy. As though waiting to fall with all its ponderous, judicial weight upon some luckless passer-by—as it had fallen on him, Donegal reflected.

He tramped up the slippery-smooth steps and went down a musty, yellow-painted corridor that smelled of wet clothing and stale tobacco. The upturned collar of his coat felt like a clammy hand against the back of his neck. He kept thinking that he ought to go back, out into the rain; but he hadn't come this far just to retreat at the last moment.

McQuade was behind the desk when Donegal went in. He didn't look up. His fat round face glistened in the bar of bright light that fell from a green-shaded desk lamp. His solid, muscular neck seemed to have gained a couple of sizes since Donegal had seen him last.

Without looking up, McQuade snapped: "Well, what is it? State your business." He sounded harassed.

He was the only cop in the office. From the back came the sound of precinct men in their lockers. From the right-hand corridor came a drone of voices belonging to central-office homicide dicks.

Donegal leaned his back against the wall by the door and said softly: "Hello, Tarheel."

Tarheel was McQuade's pet name among the department men. He jerked his head up sharply and saw Donegal for the first time. He took a long look. Then he took another. His round face quivered and then froze. His throat moved as he swallowed—the first time silently, the second time with a peculiar clicking noise.

"Babe Donegal," he whispered.

"Greetings," Donegal said comfortably. He didn't move from the doorway.

Color drained slowly from McQuade's face. "Babe, by all that's holy!" He ran fingers through his silvery hair; moistened his lips cautiously and stared. "Babe, you get out of here!"

Donegal regarded him steadily. "I came to see Sam Denby. It's Detective Lieutenant Sam Denby now, isn't it? Tell him that Babe Donegal wants to see him."

McQuade said: "No, Babe." He flattened square, heavy hands on the desk top. "You get out of here! You don't want to see the lieutenant. You don't want to see anybody around here."

"Denby!" Donegal repeated.

McQuade just sat and stared, his round face twisting comically. Only there was nothing funny about it, Donegal reflected. Nothing funny at all. He smiled stiffly, said: "All right, Tarheel, I'll see him myself. I know the way. I ought to."

Without any warning McQuade jumped up from behind the desk and blocked Donegal's way. He

was breathing hard. His big hands flicked out, patting Donegal's pockets, sliding inside his armpits. They came away empty.

Donegal laughed softly. "Why not let Denby worry about me, Tarheel?"

For a moment Donegal thought he was due to get socked. McQuade's dark-blue eyes hardened, froze over. His face went alternately dark red and very white. He patted Donegal's shoulder nervously.

"Listen, Babe," he urged, "don't stay here. You're only asking for it. For your own sake, get out. You don't belong in headquarters. You're not a cop any more."

"I know," Donegal nodded. "I just want to see Sam Denby. I've got a one-track mind, Tarheel."

He moved suddenly, brushed past McQuade and went down the corridor toward the homicide office. The door was partly open. He could see through it into the big, bare room. The usual poker session was going on around the scarred, wooden table. Everything in the room was the same: the same desks, the same chairs, the same faces—most of them. Only a few of the faces were new. Three years wasn't much time after all, Donegal reflected. Things didn't change much in three years.

He moved silently inside and leaned against the wall. He kept his hands in his pockets and didn't announce his presence. No one noticed him standing there in his weather-stained coat and hat. He was scared, deep down inside, but he wasn't going to show it. Not if he could help it.

Lieutenant Denby saw him first. The dark man sat facing the doorway, cards fanned out in slender brown fingers. His head, outlined against a yellow window shade behind him, looked somewhat satanic. He had little pointed ears that stood flat against his long, narrow skull. His yellow-brown eyes were hooded under heavy lids. He had a reversible topcoat on, and his hat was on the floor under the chair.

He glanced up once, casually, at Donegal's tall figure near the doorway, and then returned to study his hand. Nothing moved in his face. He gave no outward sign of recognition. There was a lot of talk and hoarse laughter spilling around the table. And after a while Denby's silence became noticeable. The other dicks looked puzzled and then caught the contagion and were silent, also.

Denby finally sighed, put his cards down flat, spread his brown hands over them and looked up again. His yellow-brown eyes met Donegal's squarely. They were somber, dangerous eyes. They made Donegal feel deadly cold inside.

"Babe," Denby said heavily. "Babe Donegal."

The silence was suddenly thick enough to peel. The half a dozen dicks in the room swiveled to stare at the young man in the doorway. None of them said a word; they just stared. There wasn't a single spark of warmth in any of the six pairs of eyes that examined Donegal. The lieutenant's eyes were the coldest of all.

Donegal smiled slowly. "I thought you might like to see me, Sam."

The dark man whispered: "No, you don't belong here. Why did you come back?"

"I thought you'd like to know that I was out of the can."

"I knew all about that."

"Well, I thought I'd look in to see you, anyway."

Denby said heavily: "I don't ever want to see you, Babe. You're just a screwy kid who turned rat. You fell for heavy dough." The lieutenant's fingers drummed softly on the table. "Sure, I know you behaved and got out ahead of time. Good record. But I never thought a rat like you would have the guts to come back here, like this."

Donegal's face went pale. He said quietly: "I'm not a rat, Sam. You know I'm not. I was—"

One of the dicks drawled: "Aw, why don't you take off?" His voice sounded loud and harsh in the tense room. Donegal didn't look at him; he kept his eyes pinned on Sam Denby, sitting motionless in his chair. Denby didn't say anything. The other dicks got up from the table one by one and stood around against the walls, staring. It took everything Donegal had to remain in the doorway under that battery of hard, hostile eyes.

The lieutenant spoke suddenly.

"Yeah, you were framed. I never saw a guy come out of clink yet who didn't claim he was framed. But you had your trial, Donegal. You got what was coming to you. Not enough, if you ask me. I'd have liked to pin a real rap on you. A rat like you!"

One of the dicks said hoarsely: "Powder out of here, Donegal. There's a limit to how long we can stand looking at you."

Another dick got up and elaborately opened a window. The lieutenant's dark face remained expressionless save for a thin frown incised between his black brows. His solid shoulders were hunched forward a little. He was the only one left sitting at the table.

Donegal knew what they were all thinking. Babe Donegal, the most promising rookie on homicide. That was three years ago. That was before the Reedland & Gorne bond job, where DeParma, the patrolman, was killed. Babe was there, right out on the street in front of Reedland & Gorne's office. He could have stopped the killers.

Instead, he let himself get slugged. They found two grand notes in his pocket when he came to, and he had no reasonable explanation to account for them. He had a gun in his hand and he could have nailed the killers in their tracks. But he didn't shoot. He was paid not to shoot. That was what these dicks were thinking now.

Babe Donegal—rat!

II.

Donegal said aloud: "Harry Schiller framed me. You know that, Denby. I happened along outside Reedland's that night by accident, and one of the shooters tumbled out and thought I was the lookout man. It was dark, he couldn't see my face. He shoved the money in my pocket before I knew it, and said, 'Hurry back'; then the prowl-car boys came along and shot him cold. When the others piled out of the building it was a free-for-all and DeParma was killed. I socked one guy, and I'm sure that guy was Harry Schiller."

"Yeah!" Denby said. He looked faintly amused. "You *socked* him. You had a gun in your mitt, and you used knuckles. Hell, Babe, that story will never go down. You could have boxed the whole mob. We still don't know if it was Schiller's mob that pulled it. We could've found out, if you had used your gun. Why didn't you? Why did you let DeParma get killed and let the prowlies nail the hood you say gave you two grand—by mistake! Why didn't you shoot?"

Donegal didn't answer. He couldn't. He kept swallowing the hardness in his throat and trying to look sore and injured, but he couldn't tell Denby why he hadn't used his gun.

He'd never shot at a man in his life. Three years ago he'd been a raw rookie, had never seen action. He had turned yellow, that was all. Not for himself. It was just that he couldn't shoot down a fleeing man like that. His stomach had given way at the thought of it and he'd turned sick, right then and there. So the investigating board said he was bribed not to fire. They gave him a comparatively light sentence. Four years. He had behaved and made it in three.

Lieutenant Denby was shaking his head slowly. "You still haven't got the answer, have you?"

Donegal took pains with his words. He said stubbornly: "I've got two leads. You wouldn't work on them before, and that's why I came straight back here, now. It's no fun for me to stand here and listen to you, Sam. I'm not enjoying this. I'm just telling you about the hood who told me to hurry back. And something else—the gold tooth cap. I knocked it out of somebody's mouth in the free-for-all. It belongs to the guy who headed the Reedland & Gorne bond job. He was giving the orders. Those two things will prove I didn't palm that two grand."

"They don't mean a thing; not a thing," Denby said with quiet bitterness.

"They'll prove that Harry Schiller's mob pulled the job. I'm sure of it. That's what I came to tell you. I'm going to get Schiller. I'm going to drag him in here and show you I'm not a grafter and I'm not yellow."

"No!" Denby sneered. His voice was implacable. "You're just a rat!"

He got up and stood close to Donegal when he said it. There was more venom, more bitter hatred in the dark man's voice than Donegal could take.

Babe swung at him! He swung hard, with everything he had, and his fist connected flush with Denby's spade-shaped jaw.

Denby didn't try to duck the punch. He rolled his head and rocked a little on his heels. Just a little. Then he swung in return, suddenly, his arm flashing out and clipping the side of Donegal's head.

Three years in clink doesn't improve a man's physique. Donegal bounced back against the door with a thud. His knees buckled and he hit the floor. Warm blood trickled from the cut on his cheek. He sat up on the floor and shook hair dazedly out of his eyes.

The company of dicks made muttering noises and dragged out their saps. Their faces were ugly.

Lieutenant Denby suddenly spread his long arms and held them off as Donegal climbed laboriously to his feet.

"Take it easy. Let Babe alone. Don't hit him, because he can't take it. He can't even dish it out."

That was worse than if they had all ganged up on him. Donegal leaned back against the wall, sucking air into his lungs. His lips were drawn back over his teeth, and his breath whistled.

"You'd better get out now, Babe," the lieutenant said in a suddenly soft voice. "Go home and sleep it off. You don't know what you're doing. You're just a screwy kid, Babe. Go on home."

Donegal wiped blood from his face, rocked a little on his feet. "I'll see Harry Schiller first."

"But behave yourself, Babe."

Donegal didn't say anything more. He glanced once around the room, at the hard faces staring at him, then turned and walked from the homicide office in dead silence.

McQuade was standing in the hallway when he went past. The silvery-haired cop looked at him and whispered: "You ain't really going to see Schiller, are you, Babe?"

"Yeah, I am. Really."

"Well, take it easy, Babe. Schiller's poison to you. If you need any help, Babe—"

Donegal stared at McQuade's red face. "Why should you do anything for me? I'm just a rat."

McQuade screwed up his mouth, said: "Aw, hell! Get out of here."

Donegal got out.

He had dinner at a small cafeteria across town, sitting near the window and watching people pass in the rain. He bought a pack of cigarettes and smoked three of them, then went out.

It was close to six in the evening when Donegal found the house. He paused a moment on the wet sidewalk, staring at the familiar brownstone walls, the little plot of grass and the shiny brass handrail

leading up the steps to the door. He drew a deep breath and walked up to the bell, rang it, frowned at the rain.

Mrs. Talbot was the first person in three years to smile at him. She was a tall, buxom woman with a wealth of snowy hair, work-worn hands and the complexion of a sixteen-year-old. She held the door of her boardinghouse wide open and stared, then she exclaimed:

"William Donegal, but it's good to see you!"

"Hello, Mrs. Talbot." Donegal walked into the dim, antiquated parlor, his gray eyes flicking to each familiar object. Babe Donegal had boarded here since the time he had put on his first pair of long pants and gotten a job.

Mrs. Talbot said cheerfully: "I've got your old room all fixed up, William. I'm glad you're back. Honestly, I am." Then she looked as if she was going to cry. Donegal couldn't say anything.

"You're looking fine, William," she said.

He didn't look fine. His jaw was slightly swollen and there was a little dried blood on his cheek. But he said: "I feel swell, Mrs. Talbot. You're looking pretty good, too."

He went upstairs to his old room, at the head of the hall. It was dark up here, but he moved with an unerring sense of position. He opened the door and stopped dead.

A man was sitting there, in an attitude of patient waiting. His head and shoulders were black against the gray of the window.

Donegal switched on the light.

It was the little guy in the expensive green trench coat. He sat on the edge of a chair near the bed. He was slightly hunched over; his liquid brown eyes smiled and his mouth twitched. Donegal stood silent, motionless, just staring at him. Then he closed the door softly and remarked bitterly: "Hello again."

"Hello, Babe." The little guy grinned, then wiped it off. "Your landlady let me up. She must've forgotten to tell you. I've been here quite a while."

"What do you want? What's the play?" Ragged impatience crept into Donegal's voice.

The little guy smiled and took off his hat. His hair was smoothly white, parted boyishly on one side. He unbuttoned his green coat, reached in a back pocket and took out a pint bottle of Scotch. He took two glasses from a table and poured in silence, then got out a cigarette case and offered it to Donegal. Donegal accepted one and leaned the smoke forward into the flame of the lighter. His gray eyes were fixed on the monogrammed case.

"J. W. A.," he read. "All right. I've got you placed. Your name is Atkinson."

The little guy nodded, faintly pleased. He looked at his glass, took a sip of the Scotch, and then held the glass in both hands between his knees. His thick white hair was immaculately groomed. His brown eyes were wide and frank.

"Central Indemnity," he said.

Donegal mused: "I see."

Atkinson put his glass away and picked up his cigarette. He held it between his teeth, as if it were a cigar. When he spoke, it bobbed violently.

"What do you see?" he asked.

Donegal laughed without mirth. He stood with his legs apart, holding the glass in one hand and the cigarette in the other. "I see where I'm going to throw you out."

"Then you don't want to do business?"

"I don't have any business with you."

"Is it with Schiller?"

Donegal's eyes were suddenly dangerous. "I'm going to call on Schiller, yes."

"We can pay more," Atkinson said.

Donegal stood still. Puzzlement crept into his stare. He thinned his lips, raised his brows.

"Pay more—for what?"

The little guy looked disappointed. He sighed, put down his glass, carefully screwed on the top of his liquor bottle, and crushed out his cigarette. He put on his hat and belted his coat.

"If you change your mind," he said, "come and see me. I'll deal with you."

Donegal repeated: "For what?"

The little guy had claws under his velvet tone. He said with sudden sharpness: "You can play dumb all you want to, Babe. It's not for me to say. Maybe you know what you're doing, and maybe not. You did your stretch and maybe you deserve what's coming to you, now. I don't know. I'm not in your shoes and I don't want to be."

He paused and belted his coat tighter around his whippet frame. "But listen, just once. Play your game out, Babe, but remember I'm right behind you. I'll always be behind you. And when you go down, I'll be right on top of you—hard."

His soft voice finished. He smiled. Suddenly apologetic, he slid around Donegal's motionless figure and went out through the doorway. His footsteps pattered for a moment on the stairs and then were gone.

A full minute elapsed before Donegal moved. He felt a little breathless. He walked to the light switch and turned it off, then went to the window and stared down at the street. It was empty. He dragged a chair to the window and sat down in the darkness, watching the rain. He did some thinking.

After a while he got up and put on the light again, went to a huge white-painted wardrobe closet in one corner of the room. The breathlessness inside him he now recognized as anger—anger tempered by uneasiness as he searched back in his mind for a key to the little guy's cryptic words, and failed to find one.

He shed his damp clothing and put on one of his old suits, a dark-blue serge. It was neatly pressed, hanging as he had left it, three years before. It was a little loose on him; he had lost some weight. In a right-hand pocket he found a gold tooth cap, and he took this back with him to the window, toying absently with it. He had knocked it out of somebody's mouth, back there in front of Reedland & Gorne's offices. He had thought it might be Harry Schiller's. Right now, he was sure that it was Harry Schiller's.

Turning out the light, he stretched out on the bed and closed his eyes. He smoked two more cigarettes. Downstairs, a telephone bell rang stridently. He started up to answer it, then sank back as Mrs. Talbot's voice drifted up to him. After a while her feet sounded on the steps and she tapped on the door.

Her voice was muffled. "William?"

Donegal got up and opened the door for her. The big white-haired woman came in, looking puzzled. She snapped on the light.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"I like it," Donegal said. "Was the telephone call for me?"

Mrs. Talbot smiled. "It was from Sheila. She wants to see you, William. She just heard you were . . . you were back. She's been waiting for you, William." Mrs. Talbot actually blushed a little.

Donegal said: "I know she waited." His voice was flat. He smacked a fist into his cupped palm, remembering Sheila Marquand. Straight black hair, curling low over slim shoulders; large dark eyes with little fascinating flames dancing deep behind them. A cute red mouth, trembly underlip. A tall, proud figure. She had written to him often. When he thought of her, now, he felt queer inside; his stomach seemed to curl up and his heart began to pound.

Mrs. Talbot said anxiously: "You still love her, don't you?"

"Yes, I still love her," Donegal answered.

"That's fine."

Donegal shrugged into a topcoat and picked up a brown scoop felt. "Where does she live now?"

"The Christopher Arms. That's a new apartment, right down by the River Drive. She sounded excited when she called, William. You . . . you'll be nice to her? You've changed, I can see. She used to come around here every so often and talk to me about you."

"But she didn't meet me today, when I got out," Donegal thought. "There was just the little insurance dick, Atkinson. She wasn't there." But he didn't say this aloud.

Mrs. Talbot was saying: "Sheila loves you terribly, William."

Donegal went out in a hurry.

III.

The Christopher Arms was reached by taking two subways and a vagrant ferry and walking up a sharply tilted, cobbled street, then turning into an area to the right. At night the entrance to Christopher Place was obscure and almost invisible, so that it was likely to be missed.

Donegal didn't like the district at all. He didn't like the thought of Sheila living here. It was a sort of lagoon, a quiet backwash of solemnly decaying brownstone mansions, among which the Christopher Arms rose phoenixlike, very new and shiny. A bright finger pointing to the sky.

Rain still came down in monotonously whispering curtains. There was a street lamp at the dead end, and it had a wire netting over it that cast a giant spider's web over the street.

There was no doorman at the lobby entrance. The air inside was warm and dry, mechanically washed clean. The carpet had air cushions under it. The scattered furniture was expensive and very empty. A slick-haired desk clerk glanced at Donegal with boredom and took up his magazine again.

Donegal studied the row of impassive mailboxes. There were no names in the first two, then Sheila's on the third floor. He ignored the automatic elevator, smiled to the desk clerk who smiled vaguely back, and walked up the stairs to the third-floor landing. Turning an ell in the corridor, he knocked several times on the apartment door before footsteps sounded behind it.

The footsteps were heavy. They were a man's—not the quick, eager staccato of Sheila's high heels.

A big blond man in his early thirties opened the door a little, looked at Donegal, and opened it wider. A word came from a corner of his mouth: "Yeah?"

Donegal thought he had the wrong apartment. He said, "Sheila—Miss Marquand. Does she live here?"

The man sucked at a back molar and stared. His eyes were a pale yellow-gray, marred by flecks of bloodshot. He looked vaguely familiar. He had on a snap-brim hat, a brown herringbone suit, and he carried pigskin gloves in one hand. On the floor beyond the partly opened door was a pair of dripping overshoes. A raincoat was visible, thrown over the arm of a red-leather chair.

He didn't say anything at all. Donegal kept wondering where he had seen him before.

"I guess I've got the wrong address," Donegal said. "I thought Miss Marquand lived here. Sheila Marquand."

The big man said suddenly: "Come on in."

"Does she live here?"

"She does." The big man reached casually into a back pocket and took out a short, snubby-barreled .32. The muzzle was like a little black eye, staring fixedly at Donegal. "Come on in. You're Babe Donegal, ain't you? Sure! Come on in."

Donegal stared at the gun and lifted one shoulder in a faint shrug. His lean face was expressionless. Behind it, his mind was functioning in high gear, but somewhat like a marine propeller that is lifted out of water. It had nothing to bite into.

Then he said: "You're Archie Zell, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

Archie Zell—one of Schiller's rod men. Donegal felt a cold wind blowing up his spine. He stepped inside the doorway and the revolver swiveled to keep pointed at him. He walked through the tiny foyer into the living room, pushed back his hat and spread his feet a little on the rug.

It was Sheila's apartment, no doubt about that. There was a large green glass bowl on a table, filled with calla lilies. Sheila always had them around her. There was other evidence of her presence, too: a black leather handbag on a coffee table, with her silvered initials; the faint, disturbing scent of a woman's perfume lingering in the air.

But Sheila wasn't in.

Donegal turned to face the blond man, and Archie Zell was right behind him.

"Where is she?"

"We'll come to that later, Babe," said Zell.

"It's another frame, isn't it?"

The big man laughed, deep in his throat. His eyes went almost pure yellow, like little golden crescents in the flat planes of his face. "That's a good one," he said. "What do you mean, *another?* You and me are going to talk, that's all. Just talk. You're a smart boy, Babe."

"Sure, I'm smart," said Donegal.

"So long as we both know it." The big man waved to a chair. Donegal remained standing. The big man said suddenly: "What did you tell that guy Atkinson?"

"Nothing!"

"You sure?"

"What am I supposed to tell him?"

Archie Zell said softly: "Maybe you could spill a little about what Siggy Swayne told you."

"Swayne?"

The big man waved his snubby gun, impatiently. Donegal sat down on a leather lounge and Zell rested on a corner of the table. Zell said:

"Siggy was the hop-head who gave you the two grand in front of Reedland's three years ago. That's just between you and me. Not for publication."

Donegal's eyes were careful, watching. "I don't get it."

"You got it already. What did Siggy tell you when he handed you the dough?"

"He didn't tell me anything. If he did, why do you want to know? That business is dead and buried long ago."

The big man snarled suddenly: "The hell it is!"

Donegal sat very still.

"The Reedland bonds never did show up. They're still missing. Now tell me you didn't know about that!" Zell sneered.

Donegal's face turned wooden, staring at the big guy. Zell's eyes were still like bright metallic-yellow crescents, crinkled by an unamused smile around the corners.

Donegal shook his head slowly. "No, I didn't know that the Reedland & Gorne bonds were still missing. I thought Harry Schiller got away with them, fenced them here or abroad." He kept a frown on his face, hiding the excitement that pounded inside him. This was what the little insurance dick, Atkinson, had meant. He felt a growing sense of dizzy unreality steal over him. He repeated: "Schiller got the bonds."

"Oh, sure—Schiller got 'em," the big man drawled. He was very much at ease. "I'll draw it for you, if you want. Siggy Swayne had charge of 'em. Siggy cached 'em some place; stuck away fifty grand in negotiables. That's a lot of cabbage, Babe; but you know better. There's more than the bonds. There's the green book."

"Green book?" Donegal asked. He frowned.

"Listen, once. Siggy Swayne pulled a dumb one coming back and mistaking you for one of the boys. He got panicky, top-cloudy. He told you where he'd ducked the stuff. Then he was killed by the prowlies, before he could speak to Schiller. So you're the only one who knows where those bonds are, Babe! Siggy Swayne told you."

Donegal whispered: "No, he didn't."

The big man got up lazily and waggled the gun, weighing it in his big white palm. A muscle crawled along the ridge of Donegal's jaw. He dried his hands on his thighs and moistened his lips, looked up at Archie Zell.

He said: "Wait a minute, you're making a mistake. Siggy Swayne didn't say anything to me at all. I don't know anything about a green book. All I came here for was Sheila. Where is she?"

Archie Zell smiled lazily and suddenly swung his gun downward. It cracked hard against Donegal's cheekbone, ripped off skin and knocked him from the lounge. He sprawled on all fours on the carpet, shook pain dazedly from his head. The big man took a step backward, moistened his lips and stood still, smiling. His yellow eyes had turned dreamy.

"Maybe you think you're playing it smart, Babe. You got yourself put in stir where we couldn't reach you. But you're out now, see? You might as well come through. Where did Swayne hide that stuff?"

Donegal asked again: "Where is Sheila?"

He started to climb up from the floor. The big guy doubled his fist and caught Donegal with a straight left that hooked under his chin and crashed into his throat. Donegal staggered back against the wall, gasping for breath. His throat went on fire and his eyes dimmed—

Water splashed into his face. Archie Zell moved carefully backward, still holding his gun. He leaned against the table.

"Talk now?"

Donegal couldn't if he wanted to. He gasped out a croaking sound and sat down on the lounge once more. He couldn't move. The big man shrugged his shoulders, leaned down and brushed a thick, blunted finger along one of the white flowers. Then he looked at Donegal.

"I'll wait," he said.

The jangle of the doorbell knifed in the stillness. Then it stopped and there was nothing to be heard but the persistent patter of rain and a rasping, unnatural sound, an animal sound. It was Donegal, breathing.

The big man cocked his head on one side and drawled. "All right, Babe. Just relax. Sit still. It's your girl at the door. If you get out of your chair when I answer it, she'll get it where neither of you will like it. Understand?"

Donegal nodded. He didn't stir on the lounge. The big man walked across the living room to the tiny foyer. Donegal could see his broad, powerful back, and little else.

Then Sheila's voice came, a trifle impatient, huskily thrilling and soft as ever. She said:

"Hello, Archie. What on earth are you doing here?"

The sound of her voice was like an electric shock to Donegal. He stared down at his fingers, found them trembling. He clenched his fists into two hard knots, but the shiver went on up his forearms and shoulders. His face was gray, the color of lead.

The big man said with casual familiarity: "Hi, Sheila. Your boy friend is in here, now. We've been having a chat."

It was just a second before anything more was said. And in that second Donegal felt himself turn sick and disillusioned, seething with bitter thoughts. The Reedland & Gorne bonds had never been found by the police or the Schiller mob or the insurance company that covered the brokers for their loss. The Schiller mob and everyone else thought that Donegal knew where they were. But Donegal didn't know. Siggy Swayne had simply shoved the two grand notes at him and said, "Hurry back." The hood had made a mistake in identity, but his words didn't add up to much sense. And what was this business about a green book? Donegal wondered.

He realized now that they had all been waiting for his release. Harry Schiller's mob, the police, and white-haired Atkinson of Central Indemnity—all waiting and thinking that Babe Donegal knew something. Waiting three years while he was behind prison bars. Sheila, too—she knew Archie Zell; she had kept in contact with Donegal during the prison years; she had deliberately asked him here. And she greeted Zell as an old friend, apparently not too surprised at finding him in her apartment! Donegal clenched his hands again, fighting desperately to control the all-gone feeling inside him.

Then a third voice joined the two at the door. A man's voice, pitched high and sharp with irritability. It rasped:

"Archie, what the hell is this all about? What are you doing here?"

It was a voice that had haunted Babe Donegal for three years.

It was the voice of Harry Schiller, big-time gambler and mobster de luxe.

Archie Zell said softly: "Hello, Harry. I'm here on business."

"You've got no business around here!"

"Yeah, I have. I got a job to do."

"The hell you have!"

"I got a job to do, Harry. I don't like doing it. But I got to do it."

The high, sharp voice suddenly dropped to a low note. It was suddenly husky. "Listen, Archie—what are you looking like that for? Archie, listen—"

"So long, Harry," the big man purred.

Sheila's voice came in a sudden, frantic scream. *"Don't! Oh, please—don't!"*

Her words were drowned out by the sudden bitter crash of Zell's .32. Donegal got to his feet with a curse of surprise. His face was dead-white. He staggered the first step, straightened with an effort, and then crossed to the foyer. Footsteps pattered away down the corridor.

Harry Schiller stood stiffly in the doorway, blocking Donegal's exit. He was dressed in dinner clothes, with a blood-red carnation in his lapel and a dubonnet tie to match. His camel's-hair topcoat lay in a crumpled pile at his feet. His face was thin and dark and his black eyes bulged. Red blood bubbled up beneath his stiff white shirt front.

He went down slowly, striking the floor first with his knees, then his hands. He started to crawl out into the corridor. He didn't see Donegal. His hands shook when he lifted them from the floor. He had a heavy .45 automatic clutched in his right fist. There was utter silence in the corridor—and then it was shattered by the heavy thunder of the .45 Flame lanced from the gun in Schiller's hand.

Donegal vaulted over him with a curse. He was in time to see Archie Zell skid around the ell in the corridor and vanish. Sheila Marquand was not so fortunate. The girl was trapped, caught in a small recessed doorway. She was standing straight and stiff with her back flat against the wall. She didn't dare move. Schiller's wild bullets were making a curtain of lead across her path to safety!

The gunfire ended with a final burst of frantic, racketing sound. There was a low, tortured moan

in the smoke-hazed silence. Schiller's fingers slowly released his gun. He started crawling toward the frightened, white-faced girl. His thin, dark face suddenly convulsed. His eyes almost started from his head. He crawled on for three more paces and then suddenly collapsed face-first on the hall runner. He spread-eagled slowly, tiredly. He lay limp!

Donegal caught up the hot, smoking gun and pounded down the hall toward the girl. Archie Zell had completely made his getaway. From far down in the dismal, rain-swept court a motor roared. Someone was screaming distantly, yelling for the police.

Halfway down the corridor Donegal slowed, and his footsteps became heavy. He paused in front of the girl.

"Sheila—"

Her red lips twisted pitifully. "Oh, Babe, I'm so sorry! What's happened to you?"

Babe made an inarticulate sound and stared at her, drinking in all the loveliness he had spent three years dreaming about. If anything, she had become more beautiful. Her black hair was lustrous and gleaming, a casque that framed her white, frightened face. Her eyes were wide, ringed with white, moving over his features with little desperate jumps.

"We've got to get out of here," she whispered. Her husky voice shook with fright. "Don't you see? You can't stay—"

Donegal shook his head. His mouth was tight. "No," he said.

"But don't you know what it means if you're caught?" She tugged at his arm. "Babe, *please!*"

"I know what it means," he said. He took a deep breath. His throat hurt, felt like raw fire. "It's a frame. And you seem to be in on it."

"Babe, you don't think that!"

"You called me here, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I—"

He pounded on: "You came here with Harry Schiller and you know Archie Zell, the guy who shot him down. I don't know what you've been doing in the three years I've been away. But I can guess."

Her eyes were wide and blue and frantic. She patted his arm with a quick, nervous gesture.

"This is no time to explain, Babe," she said swiftly. "They'll hit you for this murder; they won't believe me if I say you didn't do it. Schiller's mob and everybody else thinks you know where Reedland's bonds are. They've waited three years for you to come back, Babe."

Donegal started to reply, but she rushed on with hurried breathlessness: "I've been working for you all those years, Babe. I came to know these men through deliberate effort. I thought I could help —somehow—" Her voice trailed off in a helpless little shrug. She trembled from head to foot.

Donegal stood fumbling with something in his pocket. It was the little gold tooth cap.

He said abruptly: "Stay here, Sheila."

Turning, he walked down the hall to Schiller's sprawled body. He was still carrying the dead man's gun. Schiller lay with arms outflung, fingers crooked into claws that dug deep into the thick carpet. Light from the open apartment door glistened on a little puddle of red that spread under him.

Donegal's stomach started doing flip-flops. He had to clamp his teeth tightly together when he turned the dead man over. Schiller's pink lips were slightly parted, his teeth gleaming faintly white beneath the line of his thin hairline mustache. Donegal hunkered down, gritting his teeth together until lumps of muscle stood out beneath his skin. He pulled the dead man's upper lip far back and examined the teeth, finally tapped them with a fingernail.

The teeth were all sound, all perfect!

He remained kneeling, his brows knitted in puzzlement and sudden despair. He stared at the gold tooth cap and wondered about a lot of things. For three years he had pictured his task as comparatively simple; coming back and nailing Schiller as the head of the gang that had looted Reedland & Gorne's bonds. The gold tooth cap he had knocked out of somebody's mouth was supposed to prove Schiller present at the robbery. For three years he had nursed bitter hatred against the man on the basis of this evidence.

Now Harry Schiller was dead; and his teeth were all perfect!

Donegal got to his feet slowly, mechanically brushing his knees. He started down the corridor toward Sheila.

The recessed doorway was empty. She wasn't there. She was gone. The corridor was deserted, except for himself and the murdered man.

IV.

There was no sound. A sudden hush had fallen over the apartment building. Donegal glanced at the bank of elevator doors, saw that none of the indicators were moving. The doors on either side of the corridor remained tightly shut.

He felt tired. He wanted to sit down on the corridor floor beside Schiller's body and wait for the cops to come.

Instead, he walked to where Sheila had stood, sensing the faint perfume she had worn. He looked out through the window at the end of the hall, down at the wet pavement of Christopher Place.

Through the rain he could make out the top of a sedan parked a few feet beyond the apartment marquee. A shadow moved along the dark pavement. It crossed the bar of light reaching from the doorway, and Donegal saw that it was Sheila.

Another shadow moved to meet her; a man. They stepped into the light and stared up through the rain toward the window where Donegal stood.

Donegal sucked air past his sore throat with sudden surprise. He recognized the prim gold spectacles and thin, triangular face of the man with Sheila. It was Enoch Reedland, senior partner of Reedland & Gorne; the man whose fifty grand in bonds had caused all this. Enoch Reedland with Sheila!

They looked at the car and hesitated. Then they glanced up at the window, and both began waving their arms frantically. Donegal couldn't make it out. They ran suddenly toward the car; Reedland yanked the door open, slid behind the wheel, and Sheila got in beside him. The car roared off and was gone.

The silence in the hall was suffocating. It spread a thick choking blanket over the dead man, sprawled so motionless on the blue runner rug. Donegal felt panic fingers steal slyly into his brain. The sense of suffocation grew until he felt breathless, trapped.

Turning, he walked swiftly to the head of the stairs and leaned over the banister. There was no sound. It was incredible that the shots had gone unnoticed. He looked back at the elevators, at the dead man, and then started down the stairs. His legs were trembling with an insane urge for speed. He started to take the steps three at a time, dropping to the second-floor landing with a jar.

He had hold of the newel post and was rounding the landing toward the second flight of steps when Detective Lieutenant Denby stepped from the shadows surrounding them.

The lieutenant came up behind him; a dim, swift-moving blur. He rammed a gun into Donegal's back.

Donegal froze in his tracks!

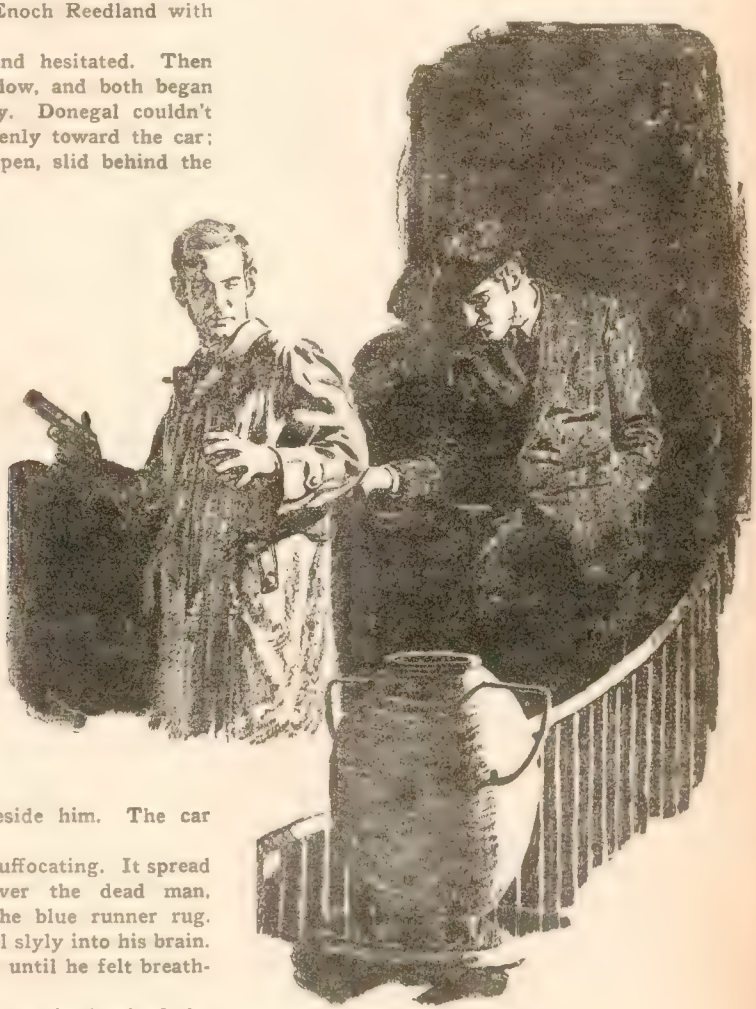
Denby's soft voice said: "Upstairs, Babe. Don't rush away."

Donegal didn't turn or look at him. His jaw tightened stubbornly. He let air out of his lungs between his clenched teeth.

The lieutenant said: "Drop your gun, Babe."

For the first time Donegal realized he was still holding Harry Schiller's gun in his hand. It felt hot and slippery against his palm. He dropped it as though it burned him, and it bounced to the floor with a dull thud.

"That's better," Denby grunted. "Now we'll go upstairs. Don't try anything funny, Babe. I'd as



Lieutenant Denby rammed a gun into Donegal's back, said: "Drop your gun, Babe."

soon let you have it as not."

The slick-haired desk clerk from the lobby below poked his head carefully over the landing floor. He let his eyes come level with the carpet and blinked up at Denby.

"You . . . you got him, lieutenant?"

"Yes! Come up here."

The desk clerk came up. Donegal turned slowly and looked at Denby. The lieutenant's flat, bony face was utterly expressionless. Donegal had expected to see satisfaction in the brown, somber eyes, but there was just infinite wariness. The dark-faced man's shoulders were hunched forward a little over the gleam of the Police Positive in his fist. His eyes met Donegal's flatly, with no warmth.

"How did you get here?" Donegal asked slowly.

"I got a call."

"From whom?"

Denby smiled coldly. "I don't know. It was just a call. Upstairs, Babe Donegal."

Donegal turned and walked slowly back up the steps and down the corridor to Schiller's body. The desk clerk followed them, his mouth hanging open. Denby muttered something and then didn't make a sound for a minute. He waved Donegal silently over against the wall, then squatted down and stared with veiled, hooded eyes at Schiller's contorted face, at the red on the white shirt front, at the twisted lips and gleaming teeth.

"It looks like you went stir-crazy, huh, Babe?"

Donegal couldn't say anything. Speech was impossible. His throat pulsed and burned with pain.

"I see you did catch up with Schiller," Denby went on. "And it's murder, now!"

"I didn't do it!" Donegal said hoarsely.

"The hell you didn't."

"I didn't do it."

The lieutenant's dark brows lifted to form two V's. He made a clucking sound, stepped around Schiller's body and waved Donegal into the mellow lighting of the girl's apartment. The desk clerk tiptoed gingerly around the body on the floor and came in after them. His face was pasty-white. The lieutenant stopped at the telephone, then turned away from it and spoke to the clerk.

"Call headquarters from your switchboard and ask for Sergeant McQuade. Tell him to send the squad car. Tell McQuade to wake up Joe Abrams and get him here. Tell him that Babe Donegal just bumped off Harry Schiller."

The desk clerk's mouth hung open.

The lieutenant snapped: "Did you hear me?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"Then hop to it!"

The clerk backed carefully out of the apartment.

Denby studied the floor for several seconds, glanced up once at Donegal, and said: "Stay right where you are." He kept his gun in his hand, examined the room with cold, moody eyes. He crossed to two closet doors, opened them, and swore softly under his breath. He threw open the bedroom door, flicked up the light switch and poked in the closets, in there. He got down on one knee and peered under the maplewood bed. His face was several shades darker when he straightened. He looked at Donegal with hard, deliberate eyes.

"Well, where is she?"

Donegal shook his head. "Sheila? I don't know."

"She was here," Denby said. "I know she was here. She brought Harry Schiller to this place, didn't she?"

Donegal's throat constricted with tension. Sheila may have dragged Donegal into this mess deliberately, but he didn't want to think so; he couldn't bring himself to believe it. And if she were innocently involved, then he couldn't tell Denby she had been present. The lieutenant would immediately jump to the worst conclusion—that Sheila and he had lured Harry Schiller here to his death.

Donegal said: "I haven't seen her at all."

"Then what were you doing here?"

"I thought she might be in. I wanted to see her —that's why I'm here—but she wasn't home."

"Then Harry Schiller came here alone?"

Donegal nodded silently.

"Why?" Denby demanded.

Donegal shook his head. "I don't know why; I can't say."

The lieutenant said softly: "The hell you can't say. This is murder, Babe! Get that through your head."

Donegal's lips worked for a moment. "I didn't do this thing, Sam. I didn't kill Harry Schiller."

The lieutenant swore in an undertone. "Who else would want to bump off Schiller? Who but you? He's not a great loss to the community; but hell, Babe, you're the only one—"

"Archie Zell," said Donegal.

"Huh?"

"Archie Zell killed him."

Denby's teeth gleamed between thinned lips. "Archie Zell worked for Schiller. That doesn't wash. You killed Schiller because you thought he had framed you. You went nuts!"

"No, I made a mistake. It wasn't Schiller who framed me."

Denby said softly: "No?"

Donegal took out the gold tooth cap from his pocket and showed it to the lieutenant. Denby's head came forward a little on his thick shoulders. He stared at it. His dark face was lean and sharp. After a while he lifted his eyes and stared at the wall, whistling softly.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Perspiration trickled down the back of Donegal's neck, running cold along his spine. His lips were dry, and he moistened them with his tongue.

"Schiller's teeth are O. K.," he said. "He wasn't the guy who slammed out of Reedland's, three years ago."

The lieutenant hesitated, suspicion lighting his hooded eyes. He shrugged, muttered: "Well, let's have a look."

Donegal preceded him into the hall. The lieutenant stared down at Schiller's body, knelt and examined the dead man's teeth, tapped them and sighed.

"What the hell!"

"Yeah," Donegal said. "I didn't kill him, Sam."

Denby was silent. He bent down a little more over the body. He leaned his hand on the floor to support his weight. It was the hand with the gun in it.

Donegal said once again: "I want you to know that I didn't kill Harry Schiller. I want you to remember it. Turn around, Sam."

Something in Donegal's taut voice warned the lieutenant. He came around on his heel, lifting his gun from the floor. Donegal moved in on him fast. His right caught Denby high on the head. The man's breath came out with a grunt and he spun around, still on his heel. Rising, he tripped over Schiller's body and staggered across the corridor, mashing his shoulder against the opposite wall. Donegal followed him up, slammed knuckles into the dark, sardonic face. The lieutenant's eyes glittered. He tried to bring the gun up again.

"You screwy kid!"

Donegal knifed down on the cop's wrist with the edge of his palm. The gun sprang from Denby's hand. He swung a long, looping left that caught the detective behind the ear. Denby staggered and sagged to the floor. His big body was suddenly as limp as wood pulp.

Donegal stood there a moment, regaining his breath. Then he started for the stairs again. The wail of prowl-car sirens sounded in the entrance of Christopher Place. Through the gloom of curtained rain and faint lamplight could be seen the sleek, shining hoods of two red cars.

With a muttered curse Donegal turned back to the unconscious lieutenant, picked up the Police Positive from the floor and slid it into his pocket. Straightening, he went down the steps to the second landing.

Heavy voices sounded below. Around a turn in the staircase bobbed a badged, peaked cap. Light glistened on a gun barrel. Two red-faced prowlies were coming up. They looked sore.

One of them bellowed: "Denby! Lieutenant, where are you?"

Donegal turned and ran fast for the hall window at the back of the building. It was locked, and he lost precious seconds opening it. His prayer for a fire escape was answered. Swinging both feet over at once, he got halfway out before the leading cop caught sight of him and loosed a warning yell.

A gun crashed and a bullet showered glass over Donegal's shoulders. He went down the slippery wet steps two at a time. He was sobbing for breath when he reached the bottom of a deep, well-like area. The damp rainy night air set a dozen tattooing needles to work in his lungs. Sweat felt cold on his face. Panic clawed at him.

Moving cautiously along the inky wall, he found the opening to an alley. He had just entered when a flashlight sprayed yellow brightness on the alley mouth. He flattened instantly against the wall, staring upward, not moving an inch. The round circle flickered down the alley, returned, moved away and came back. The cop's voice came murmuring down through the tapping rain.

"Go up on the roof, Dave. I can't see anything. You go up, I'll go down."

More sirens sounded in the court beyond the building. A few windows went up and shrill voices clamored out through the night.

The cop's flashlight never left the alley mouth as he came down the fire escape. Donegal didn't stir. He kept Denby's gun in his pocket, not his hand. He felt afraid of it, afraid of himself and the panicky little devils inside him. He was afraid he'd use the gun, and he didn't want to use it.

The circle of brightness wavered, flickered momentarily on the pavement and shot far down the alley. The cop's shoes scraped the alley floor. Donegal stood stiff with his back against the wall, his head twisted to the right. His eyes gleamed moistly white. His face was pale and hard.

The flash jerked as the cop came close to him. The prowlie was a big, beefy man with a weather-reddened face and squinting eyes. He had long arms, and a gun dangled in thick, spatulate fingers. He came abreast of Donegal just inside the alley mouth, and his hand brushed Donegal's sleeve. He jumped with a soft, startled curse.

Donegal knew he would never have a better chance. He was in close, within grabbing distance of the cop's gun. But there wasn't time for that. The prowlie's mouth hung open, an incipient yell of warning deep in his thick throat.

Pivoting, Donegal came away from the wall like a lean, dark wraith. His white fist lashed out, the whole force and weight of his shoulders, hips and thighs behind the blow. His knuckles caught the cop across the side of his jaw, made a dull cracking sound. The prowlie shot across the alley, crashed against the opposite wall. His mouth was still open. His eyes were closed. The flash and gun fell with twin clatters to the pavement; then his knees buckled and he slowly caved in, dropping forward.

Donegal caught him, lowered him quickly to the concrete and stood in a crouch, listening. The second cop was coming down from the roof. And there were others, scattered out in the surrounding courts. Donegal's breath made whistling sounds

between his teeth. The blood pounded heavily in his temples. Turning, he loped down the alley to emerge into a small side street. Two cops boiled around the far corner. Guns shone in their fists.

A gun crashed; one of the cops yelled; a whistle skirled.

Donegal ducked his head and ran.

He turned the first corner as a bullet clipped into brick a foot above his head and screamed off in ricochet. Brick dust powdered his shoulder. He glanced back once, and put every ounce of energy into his pumping legs. Skidding around a second corner, he came out on a wide, tree-lined street that bordered the river. The brownstone houses gave way to single private dwellings with dark hedges and dense shade trees surrounding them. Several cars were parked without lights at intervals along the curb. Windows were ablaze in every home.

Long legs stretching to the utmost, Donegal pounded toward the haven offered by the dark shrubbery. He was halfway across the wide, wet street when the heavy sedan started up.

The sedan came from behind him, without lights. Its motor roared a song of power. It swung to the left, avoiding Donegal, and slowed for a fraction of a minute, brakes squalling.

"Get in! Hurry!"

It was a woman's voice.

Donegal whirled at the sound. As the car came abreast he jumped desperately. His fingers caught the open window, slipped for a breathless instant when the invisible driver gunned the car; and then his grip curled tight around the wet metal.

The driver turned the first corner with a screech of protesting tires. The sedan swayed and rocked, suddenly went into a long, hissing skid, and straightened with a sickening lurch. Donegal hung on, every muscle aching with tension. He got one hand inside the door, pushed down on the handle, moved one step back on the running board and let the door swing open. Inching his grip forward, he reached his arm around the doorpost, pushed with his knee against the inside panel, shoving against the wind pressure, and tumbled in beside the woman driver.

He didn't make a sound for a dozen seconds. His body ached and throbbed.

Finally, with a curious glance at the taut, white-faced woman behind the wheel, Donegal said: "Well, thanks, whoever you are."

The woman didn't look at him. She said: "I'm Norma Schiller. Save it until it means something. We've got some driving to do."

V.

The Cameo Club was a long, two-story building of white stucco, with ornamental cast-iron balconies beneath each window. It had a white glass and chrome marquee, a seven-foot doorman in lobster-red uniform with yards of gilt braid on his shoulders, and an expensive white-tie-and-tails clientele. There were three orchestras, tango, sweet and swing, including a Mexican string quartet that played in the murky purple of the bar lounge. All of which was merely a front for the real attraction of the Cameo Club, which was the elaborate gambling layout in the north wing of the upper floor. The south wing was reserved exclusively for the Schiller residence.

Norma Schiller trod the brake pedal with an angry, vindictive foot and the sedan's tires scattered a shower of gravel over the parking lot, lurched to a halt a foot away from the stucco wall. The woman got out, swinging long, shapely legs to the wet ground. She walked swiftly through the light rain around the rear corner to a square side door, used a key and thrust it open. Her face was white and set in the momentary flash of light.

Donegal followed her, listening to the muted thump of musical instruments and a subdued murmur of voices. It was eight o'clock, much too early for the gambling rooms to be open.

At the head of the stairs, Donegal paused and spoke for the first time since the beginning of the wild ride. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said.

She thrust a key into the door. "Of course I know what I'm doing. Don't you?"

"Those cops back there weren't chasing raindrops. They were chasing me. You put your foot in it when you gave me a lift."

She made an impatient sound, pushed open the door with her knee and walked in, flicking on the light with a backhand movement. Donegal stood just inside the doorway, his eyes ranging over the long, low-ceilinged living room.

A fire crackled in a red brick hearth to his right, behind a smoke-blackened fire screen. Red velvet curtains were draped over tall windows that reached from ceiling to floor. The place was ninety-nine percent soundproof. What faint noises there were drifted in from the windows, not through the walls. The carpet was silvery gray, the chairs and couches of soft creamy leather. One of the couches was drawn up before the fire, and a thin blue wisp of cigarette smoke drifted up from behind it. A man's feet, ankles crossed, dangled over one arm.

Norma Schiller crossed the floor, shrugging out of a knee-length checked coat. She let it fall away from her to lie in a careless heap on the carpet. She swept off her quilled black hat, sent it in a looping spiral to one of the chairs, walked to the lounge by the hearth and said thickly:

"Get out of here, Steve."

A man grunted behind the lounge. An arm appeared, waved a bottle languidly, and the man said: "Aw, Norma, have a heart! I'm so comfortable!"

"Get out, Steve!"

Steve groaned, got to his feet where Donegal

could see him. He felt a slight shock as he recognized the man. First Enoch Reedland, now Stephen Gorne, junior partner of Reedland & Gorne! He was tall and slender, about thirty-five, with unkempt sandy hair, a cleft chin and a cheerful, blurred smile. He was dressed in a bright plaid sport coat, gray trousers, and a porkpie hat with a red brush in it. He weaved a little as he stood up. He peered at Donegal and waved the bottle genially.

"Yoicks and tally-ho, varlet."

Norma Schiller said tightly: "You're drunk, Steve. Get out." She was pale, except for two angry red spots on her cheeks.

Steve Gorne sighed. "Out in the cold again. Alas and alack. Norma, my love, wouldst thou have me catch cold? Wouldst thou?"

"Go downstairs and have a drink."

Gorne looked sad. "Alas, I am broke."

"On me," said Norma Schiller. "Get out!"

Gorne shrugged, adjusted his porkpie hat at an impossible angle, pouted as he thrust his hands deep in his trouser pockets, and drifted irregularly toward the door. He paused with both hands clutching the knob and peered up at Donegal with blurred gray eyes.

"*Tsk, tsk!*" he said. "Very bad. Very bad, indeed. I know you."

Donegal looked at Norma Schiller.

She screamed: "Get out! *Get out!*"

Stephen Gorne ducked his head, hunched his shoulders, and fled. Donegal came away a little from the closed door.

"Gorne recognized me. I can't stay," he said.

"He's drunk; it doesn't matter."

"What was he doing up here?"

She shrugged. "I don't know; he's always in and out. He's a toad. He practically lives in the place."

She crossed the floor to a bleached-mahogany liquor cabinet, took out a cut-glass decanter and sipped, holding the tumbler in both hands. Five swallows later she remembered Donegal and took out another glass and put the decanter on a tray table. She gestured toward it. Donegal ignored the invitation, his glance ranging her figure.

She was very tall, just an inch shorter than his own six feet. Her hair was platinum. Pale-green crescents of jade dangled from her ears; and her eyes matched the jade. Her face was oval; her mouth full, brilliantly scarlet. She stared at Donegal for several seconds, a muscle twitching in her cheek. Then she sank slowly into a chair and her pale-green eyes were fixed on the dying fire.

"Tell me now," she said. She had a deep, almost masculine voice. "Tell me and get it over with. He went out with that girl, didn't he? He told me he had business to attend to. He didn't mention that girl."

She waited, just staring at him. Donegal stared back, startled and shocked. She didn't know she was a widow yet. She studied his face, sucked air slowly, then faster, and then the color drained away from her cheeks with a rush. She got up swiftly and gripped Donegal's arm.

"It's Harry," she whispered. "Has anything happened to Harry? You look as though something might have—"

"Something happened to him," Donegal said.

Her pale eyes darkened. She said: "I've never seen you before. I figured you were one of Harry's boys, ducking the cops the way you were. I thought he was really at work, then, after the green book —until he saw that Marquand girl."

"What green book?" Donegal said. His pulses pounded.

Her long eyes narrowed. She leaned back against a chair and said quietly: "I hope you're all right. I don't know all of Harry's hoods, but I hope you're all right—for your sake!"

Donegal said softly: "I'm not a hood, Mrs. Schiller. My name is Donegal—Babe Donegal—ex-copper. Fresh out of the pickle jar."

She straightened, and her pale-green eyes began to glow. The muscle kept twitching in her cheek. Her full red lips trembled for a moment, and she worked them a while before she fashioned words.

"You . . . you went looking for Harry?"

"Yes; and I found him."

"He—"

"Harry Schiller is dead!" Donegal told her.

She didn't give him any warning. She came at him like a great, lithe cat, her fingers hooked like talons to rake at him. Her lovely face was contorted with the fury of her hatred.

Donegal staggered under the violence of her attack. Stepping backward, he tripped over the tray table, lost his balance and went down. She came down with him, sobbing with anger, her long nails digging deep furrows in his face.

Donegal rolled aside, caught her arm and hooked it up behind her back. Her body was built of spring steel. She arched her back, kicked furiously with her high heels. Donegal raised her trapped arm a little higher. She gasped with sudden pain.

"Take it easy," he warned. "It can break."

She sobbed: "You rotten, rotten devil!"

Abruptly her tall body went limp. Her shoulders sagged. Donegal released her and she sank into a chair, leaned slowly forward and buried her face in her hands. Her platinum hair had become undone, twisting in her crimson-tipped fingers. Her shoulders quaked. After a little while gurgling sounds came out from behind her hands.

Donegal stared in shocked surprise.

She was laughing.

She dropped her hands suddenly and threw back her head, looked at him, and laughed. It was a ghastly sound. Her voice was mirthless, high-pitched on a queer note that went up and up.

With a soft curse Donegal stepped forward and

slapped her. As suddenly as she had begun, she stopped laughing. She sat up straighter and just looked at him, her pale-green eyes fixed on a point in his throat.

Donegal spread his feet a little on the carpet. Cold perspiration was on his forehead. "You don't understand," he began. "The cops are wrong. You're wrong."

She said flatly: "You killed Harry and I pulled you out of it. Isn't that funny? Shouldn't I laugh at it? The cops had you boxed, and I had to come along and pull you out of it."

"I didn't do it," Donegal said. His voice was thick. Little furrows deepened around the corners of his mouth. "The cops think I did it, and they're looking for me; but I didn't kill him."

"Harry told me about you. He said you were due out and that you had the green book. You killed him!"

"Archie Zell shot him down," Donegal explained. "I was there; I saw it. I was labeled to be the fall guy."

She measured him with startled eyes that swiftly went dull. "You happened to be there," she repeated slowly. She spoke as though reciting a school lesson. "Archie Zell shot him."

"That's right. Zell did it."

From far down below, the orchestra thumped out an indifferent rhythm. It was more a sense of vibration in the floor than sound, itself. The woman's breasts stirred suddenly, as though she had just now resumed breathing.

"Why should I believe you?"

Donegal said grimly: "You don't want Harry Schiller's murderer to get off scot-free, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"Then you'll believe me. And you can help me."

"How?"

"I want to know why Archie Zell turned on your husband and shot him."

The blonde said with bitter amusement: "Hell, that's easy. The green book."

Donegal rasped: "What about the green book?"

She got up from the chair, her figure tall and statuesque, and walked the length of the carpet. Donegal followed her with alert eyes. She came back and stared at him, her pale-green eyes interested. Her lips were clamped tightly together, a scarlet wound in the whiteness of her face.

Donegal repeated stubbornly: "What about the green book? What is it? What does it mean?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, I don't."

She said indifferently: "It's a freeze-out." She didn't look at him; she wasn't even thinking of him; she was talking solely to herself, now. "Harry never told me who hired him for the job. His boss must have done it."

"Done what?"

"Bought Archie Zell." She stared at Donegal's chin, and shook her head, puzzled. The jade crescents danced beside her long white throat. She sat down again and crossed her legs, stared dully at the tall man.

Donegal said suddenly: "How about 'Hurry back'?"

"What about it? That joint's long dead."

Nothing changed in Donegal's face.

"Joint?" he said.

"Hurry-Back Harry's, the boys called it. It was near the Reedland & Gorne building. A small dive behind a cigar store. Harry used it to recover the pay he gave the boys during prohibition days. They were suckers for Harry's wheel."

"What happened to the place?"

Her eyes were wide and staring. "It was axed. The cops tore it apart. Why?"

"I just wondered."

"Why?" she repeated.

Donegal said: "What happened to the furniture in the place after it was raided?"

"I don't know." She waved a listless hand. "Harry put it in storage, I think. The place is a beer joint, now. The Evergreen Club. Choo-Choo Travis owns and runs it."

"Thanks," Donegal whispered. "Thanks a lot."

"For what?"

"Maybe you've helped me."

"I'll help you get back behind bars, copper."

Donegal said: "I'm not a copper."

"Yes, I know." She raised her pale-green eyes to his. There were no tears in them. Her mouth was bitter. "Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"The green book," he suggested again. "What do you know about it?"

She shook her head and smiled secretly.

Donegal said: "O. K., then. I'm going now."

A corner of her mouth lifted. "You think so? You're in my place, now. You could never get out of here alive, if I didn't want you to."

Donegal waited.

She finished dully: "But I don't care; I just don't care. Go and to hell with you."

Donegal put on his hat without saying anything more. When he opened the door, the telephone started to ring. Norma Schiller didn't answer it. She sat in a chair with her chin cupped in her hands and stared at the fire dying in the red brick hearth. The phone kept ringing for as long as Donegal could hear it. Then he was out in the rain again, taking long strides toward the street.

VI.

Donegal took a deserted street, avoided people, and ducked into shadow at the sight of the cop on his beat. His footsteps were light—but not free. He was conscious of every eye that happened to meet his. For the first time he knew the fear of

the hunted, the lonely desperation of the fugitive.

The first thing he had to do, if he was to stay out of Lieutenant Denby's hands, was change his clothing and get some money. He had less than six dollars left of the State's ten. He had a little more in Mrs. Talbot's boardinghouse. He went there by taxi, abandoning the cab two blocks away.

The rain had stopped when Donegal turned the corner and examined the dark street. There were no lights on in any of the houses. The street looked cold, completely deserted. Wind made a soft, keening sound through the overhead telephone wires. A small bar was open at the far corner, and soft, plucking notes of Spanish music came from behind the frosted-glass doors. There was no one on the street; no dicks hiding in shadowed doorways.

Turning left, Donegal went up a driveway to the back of Mrs. Talbot's house. The area was in pitch darkness. He stood in black shadow for five minutes, until his eyes grew accustomed to the absence of light and assured him there was no stake-out on the place. Then he worked open a back window and crawled into the kitchen.

A clock in the hallway bonged a quarter after ten, and he crouched low on the dark stairs, startled. He listened, scarcely breathing.

After a minute he continued up the steps and went silently down the hall, opened the door to his room.

The light went on like a sudden silent explosion, blinding him. A gun prodded Donegal's ribs.

Donegal froze!

Sergeant McQuade removed the gun after a moment and heeled the door shut, walked to the chair by the window and sat down on it. He held the gun in his lap. His big, stubby fingers drummed restlessly upon it. He was out of uniform, wearing a tan topcoat and a dark-brown hat over his silvery hair. His face was very round, very red.

He grinned. "Hello, Babe," he said amiably.

Donegal's shoulders sagged with defeat. "Hi, Tarheel."

"I got you," McQuade pointed out.

"Yeah!"

McQuade said: "I wish I didn't. You going to answer me, Babe?"

"Ask me."

"Did you kill Schiller?"

"No, I didn't."

"Can you prove you didn't kill him?"

"No, I can't; not yet."

Sergeant McQuade got up from the chair with a ponderous movement and stuck the gun in his coat pocket. Donegal ranged the room with curious eyes. Somebody had taken it apart. The drawers of the big wardrobe closet all hung out, and his clothing was scattered haphazardly over the floor. The closet doors were open, the contents uprooted. A corner of the rug was folded back, the mattress of the bed upset.

Donegal turned questioning eyes on McQuade.

"Looking for something, Tarheel?"

McQuade shook his head. "Not me. I found it like this. You must have something valuable, Babe."

"I haven't, but everybody thinks I do."

"What is it?"

"Reedland & Gorne's bonds and a green book," said Donegal.

McQuade's thick throat twitched. "What do you know about the green book?"

"Nothing, except that a lot of people are anxious to get their paws on it. I wish I did know something about it. Maybe you can help me."

"Uh-uh. I can't, Babe." McQuade's round face worked curiously, his eyes screwed up with the effort of his thoughts. His voice was soft and urgent. "Look, Babe. Can't you prove you didn't kill Schiller? This is murder, Babe! It's not a measly three-year rap; it's murder. It's the chair. For God's sake, Babe—think!"

Donegal lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "You're a good egg, Tarheel. But I can't prove a thing. Nothing at all." He stared at the big cop. "So go ahead and do your duty."

McQuade's lips were dry. "My duty, yeah. But I can't, Babe. I believe in you. Don't ask me why. I just believe in you."

Babe Donegal swallowed dryly. "Thanks."

"I thought you might come back here," McQuade went on. "I just wanted to ask you if you actually killed Schiller. If you say you didn't—then you didn't, that's all. Lieutenant Denby isn't like me. He works with his head while I work with my heart, Babe. I like you as if you were my own son."

Then he said: "Babe, just answer me one thing about what happened three years ago. Tell me why you didn't use your gun. If you could just explain that—"

"I was yellow," Donegal said quietly.

McQuade stared.

"I couldn't shoot a man down. I got sick at the thought of it. Isn't that funny?" Donegal laughed softly.

McQuade said soberly. "That's not funny, Babe."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Sure, I believe you. It often happens. It makes sense now." He added softly: "Can you use a gun yet?"

"I don't know."

Old McQuade swallowed loudly. "Look, Babe. You've got work to do tonight. You're going to do something about all this, aren't you? You've got some angles, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Donegal.

"All right." McQuade swallowed again. His face wasn't red any longer. It was very pale. "Listen. Hit me! Make it good, so I'll have something to back up my story about your escaping me. If you're ever going to get in the clear, you'll have to

do it yourself. I'll give you a chance."

Donegal just stared at him, his arms dangling. "You mean you're letting me go?"

"Hit me!" McQuade repeated.

Donegal hit him. He didn't put much into the blow. His knuckles cracked on McQuade's jaw, and the big man smashed down into a chair, but he didn't go out. He sat there looking at Donegal, perspiration streaming down his face. His eyes were sick.

"For Heaven's sake, Babe—*hit me!*"

Donegal swung again. This time pain jolted through his hand and eddied up around his shoulder socket when he connected. It did the trick. McQuade's arms went out, flailing a little; then he crashed over on his side and lay still.

Donegal stood over him, rubbing his knuckles. His face was white. McQuade would be out for quite a while.

He changed suits in a hurry, found some small bills, and started down the steps.

Mrs. Talbot stood at the foot of the staircase, like a portly ghost in her white nightgown.

"William," she said, "I thought I heard something fall."

"Nothing fell."

"Everything is all right, isn't it?"

"Everything's going to be fine."

"You're going out now?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't catch cold," she said.

She turned and disappeared down the hallway. Donegal stood looking after her, a wry little smile on his lips. He walked to the front door and was about to go out when the telephone bell rang.

Donegal straightened. The phone rang again, loud and shrill in the darkness. With a shrug he turned back down the hall and lifted the receiver from the hook. He put a handkerchief over his mouth and spoke through it.

"Yes," he said.

A husky, slightly breathless voice answered him. "Babe, is that you?"

"Sheila!" Donegal gripped the phone with tight, trembling fingers. He let out breath in a long sigh. "Sheila, are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. And you?"

"So far, so good."

"But, Babe, you mustn't stay where you are. Denby will look there."

"I know; I'm just leaving."

"Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

Donegal said: "I don't know yet."

There was a long pause. Then:

"We've got to talk, darling," said Sheila. "We've got to straighten things out."

"Yes," said Donegal.

"You sound so bitter. You still think that I—"

"Where are you?"

Her voice was almost inaudible. "I'm at Enoch Reedland's. He thought it would be best if I hid there. If Archie Zell should start looking—"

"I'll be right over," Donegal said.

He hung up.

The house stood on a gentle slope to the right, beyond a row of white-painted tree trunks and immaculately trimmed box hedges. Overhead the ragged clouds parted and a cold white moon shone through, made the blue roof look black against the white-painted walls and columned porch. Donegal passed through a wrought-iron gateway and walked through thick shadows up a flagstone path to the door. There was a light on behind Venetian blinds in the left side of the house.

He rang the bell and waited.

Sheila answered the door. Her dark hair gleamed with light sifting through from behind her. Her face was in the shadows, but Donegal could see her small, uncertain smile. He watched her hands as they reached out and caught his. He stepped inside and closed the door with his heel, and she took her hands from his and touched his face, took off his coat and entwined her fingers in his hair. Her hands were cold. When he kissed her, her lips were trembling.

"Babe," she whispered, "what have they been doing to you?"

Donegal said: "I'm all right. A few bumps and scratches more or less. They don't matter, Sheila."

"They matter to me— I'm glad you came here. You'll be all right here. I hated to think of you alone tonight, dodging around like some . . . some—"

"Why is Reedland doing this for us?"

"He wants to," she said in a small voice. She reached in a pocket of her dark dress and took a pack of cigarettes, gave him one and watched him light it. Her blue eyes were dark when she met Donegal's sober gaze over the match flame. "I think he's doing it for me," she went on. "I'm not quite sure. We've become quite good friends. If he offered help, I couldn't turn him down, could I? Besides, I wouldn't. We need every bit of help we can get."

Donegal's face was thin and hard. He dragged deep on the cigarette, and his nostrils flared wide as he exhaled. He took two more drags and then dropped the smoke on the floor, ground it out and gripped Sheila's shoulders in his hands.

"Is Stephen Gorne here, too?"

"Gorne? Why, no. Reedland is in there." She gestured with her head toward the lighted room to the right.

He dropped his hands from her, and Enoch Reedland's voice came from a doorway down the hall.

"Come in, come in." The man's tone was testy, impatient. "I know a reunion like this should be private, but I can't help being the proverbial fifth

wheel. Come inside and have something to eat and drink, and we'll talk."

There were sandwiches on an inlaid table and a silver coffeepot beside three delicately painted china cups. The curtains were drawn over the Venetian blinds. Donegal sat down in a chair beside the table. He looked at Sheila's figure, curled up on a lounge across from him, and then examined Enoch Reedland.

Reedland was a small-boned man, about forty-five, with precisely carved features. His hair was very black, combed straight back from high, flat temples. He wore a light-gray suit that fitted wiry shoulders perfectly. He sat with his legs crossed and exhibited forty dollars' worth of blue silk hose and English-made shoes. His gold-rimmed glasses glittered faintly as he nodded his head and smiled.

"So you are Babe Donegal," he began. "I hope you harbor no ill-will against me for what you have suffered. You must know I was powerless to prevent what happened to you three years ago."

"It doesn't matter, now," Donegal said. "What does matter is how you fit into the mess, now."

"I just want to help," Reedland said gravely. "I want to assist you in straightening this out. You see, Sheila has fully convinced me of your innocence, and I feel as if I have a debt to pay. I wish to make amends."

"You don't owe me a thing. I can clear myself. You don't have to do a thing for me."

The thin eyebrows over the glasses lifted slightly. "I can understand exactly how you feel, young man. It is just that I suffer from too much conscience."

Donegal said grimly: "If I can stay in the clear for a few more hours, I'll clean it up."

"Then you know something?"

"I'll have the answers soon."

Reedland leaned back with a sigh and said: "That certainly is wonderful."

Donegal glanced up sharply, seeking to verify the sarcasm he detected in the man's soft voice. But Reedland was smiling and looking at Sheila. He looked down at his drink.

"I want to know what happened at Sheila's apartment," Donegal said. "Part of it adds up—your part doesn't."

The girl never took her eyes from Donegal's lean face. She said: "I can explain all that. You think I ran out on you when you left me in the corridor. But I saw Mr. Reedland through the window—I had asked him to follow me to my place, because I was a little afraid of Schiller. I knew Mr. Reedland would be downstairs when I came in with Schiller. When I looked down through the window I saw he was signaling me. I went down and he told me that Lieutenant Denby had just gone into the Christopher Arms; then we tried to signal you, but it was too late. We had to get away before the police caught me."

"What were you doing with Harry Schiller in the first place?" Donegal said.

Sheila's lips trembled. "I'd made friends with him to see if I could learn something, anything, to help you. I was in the Cameo Club with him when I learned you were—you were back. Schiller came over and told me about it. He said he wanted to talk to you, and he asked me to telephone you; and I did. I didn't know, at the time, what was going to happen."

"Wait a minute," Donegal frowned. "The whole thing was a frame, a trap for Schiller. He was due to be killed, yet he went there, apparently of his own free will. So he couldn't have known it was a trap. Did his suggestion to see me include Archie Zell?"

"He didn't say anything about Archie Zell." Sudden excitement made the girl's blue eyes glow. "But he did act as though he expected a third party at my apartment. Someone besides you."

"Was it Stephen Gorne?"

"Oh, no! I'm sure it wasn't Steve. Steve was—he was drunk, or almost so." She glanced at Reedland, but the senior partner's face was expressionless, as if cut from ivory. She went on: "He talked as though the third person had suggested the whole thing. He was rather nervous about it, and even wondered aloud whether he should go."

Donegal said grimly: "But Schiller did go. So he was invited to his death by his boss."

Reedland coughed deliberately. His prim nose looked shiny in the light. He stared into his empty coffee cup and said:

"But Archie Zell wasn't Schiller's boss. Zell was Schiller's lieutenant."

"Archie Zell sold out to somebody else. Zell killed Schiller, yes. But Zell was working for another person. The real killer. The one behind all this."

"I don't understand."

"Schiller didn't engineer the theft of your bonds," Donegal continued. "He was hired for the job by someone—someone who was so sure of success that he actually accompanied Schiller and his men to see the robbery take place. He may have gone, out of distrust of Schiller. He's the one I hit, and I know he headed the job. I thought it was Harry Schiller all this time, but his teeth didn't match."

Reedland smiled in deprecatory fashion. "It's such a small clue," he murmured.

Donegal couldn't help but look at the man's teeth when he smiled. They were all white, all even.

"I saw Norma Schiller tonight," he said. "She admitted that somebody had hired Schiller and his mob to steal your bonds, Mr. Reedland." Donegal paused. His lean face was sharp and alert. His voice was careful. "What surprises me is all this turmoil taking place over fifty thousand dollars'

worth of bonds. It's a lot of money, but it's not quite enough."

Reedland frowned abruptly. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know what I mean," said Donegal.

"But I don't."

Donegal said: "Something else was taken from your office safe. And that something else is what everybody is after."

Reedland's frown deepened. He lifted his coffee cup, looked into it, and put it down.

"Nothing else was taken," he said.

"Yes, there was." Donegal's voice was very soft. "A green book."

Reedland leaned sharply forward in his chair. His face was startled. The ivory of his skin had faded to pale gray. "Green book?"

Donegal nodded in silence.

Reedland said with crisp annoyance: "I never heard of it. It's new to me. What is this book supposed to represent?"

"You know," Donegal insisted. "You tell me."

"But I don't know, young man!"

"O. K.!" Donegal shrugged and looked at Sheila. Her lips were parted and her face was pale. Her hand crept out and took his, her fingers gripping tightly. They were trembling.

Reedland said quietly: "My bonds were never recovered. But the police and Schiller's gang think you know where they are hidden. Didn't this . . . um . . . Siggy Swayne say anything to you?" His voice was sympathetic, his smile ingratiating. "I'm asking simply because I want to help you, Donegal. I believe your story—all of it. I always did. I want to help, if I can."

Donegal shrugged. His eyes were still alert. He said carefully: "Swayne spoke only two words to me. 'Hurry back.'"

He waited, watching Reedland. The man's face was politely attentive. Donegal continued: "Norma Schiller explained that they mean Hurry-Back Harry's, a small gambling club that used to be near your office building."

Reedland sank back with a sigh, adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Yes, it was raided, if I remember correctly. I never knew the name of the place, or paid much attention to it. Does it mean anything to you, Donegal?"

Donegal's, "Maybe," was noncommittal.

Reedland put a small hand to his mouth and hid a yawn. A clock on the wall read close to midnight. He stood up, shaking his head sleepily.

"There is nothing more we can do tonight, I'm afraid. Both you will stay here, of course. There isn't a safer place in the city for either of you."

Donegal stood up. "You know what you're letting yourself in for, I hope. The police are hunting me, and probably trying to pick up Sheila, too. If you harbor us, you're involving yourself in a nasty mess."

Reedland smiled. "Nonsense. It's a small-enough return for the injustice done you because of my bonds. I told you I believe in you, young man. I want to help you, and Sheila, too. You must both remain here. Since she was present when Schiller was killed, she could identify Archie Zell, and no doubt Zell wouldn't . . . er . . . like that."

Donegal murmured: "Thank you. Then we'll stay." He grinned suddenly. "And I don't mind admitting that I've had a busy day."

VII.

Donegal lay flat on his back, staring up at the darkness of the ceiling. A cigarette dangled between his thin lips, glowing alternately red and then dimming to a pink spot in the black room. Rain water still tapped from the roof gutters. He lay on the bed, but he was fully dressed, even to his shoes which hung just over the edge out of respect for the expensive chenille spread.

Enoch Reedland's house was quiet. There was some wind outside, occasionally rattling drops of rain from the trees against the panes. Donegal could hear nothing else, beyond a faint, elusive *tick-tick* of his watch. It was twenty after one in the morning.

At one-thirty there came the sound of a motor starting. There was the quick whir of a starter, a deep, steady throb of cylinders, and then a soft clashing of gears. Heavy-ply tires ground on the gravel drive leading around the house from the garage.

Donegal got up noiselessly, went to the window and looked down. He couldn't see who was in the car when it passed. It turned through the gateway and disappeared with a soft throb that merged with the whisper of wind. It had been running without lights.

Donegal crossed to the door and stepped out into the dark, silent corridor. He didn't care to explore the house; there were servants somewhere, and he didn't want anyone to see him. He picked up his hat and topcoat from the downstairs closet and softly let himself out into the chilly night.

The garage door wasn't locked. Donegal swung it open soundlessly and slid inside. There was another car, a small coupé, and he went over to it and felt along the dark dashboard for the ignition. He breathed with relief when his groping fingers touched keys in the lock. He grinned brittlely in the darkness and slid behind the wheel, started the car and drove down the gravel path to the street. The pavements were already drying under the gusts of raw wind that whipped the poplars.

Merchant Street and Avenue K were bleak and deserted in the early-morning darkness. Donegal slid the coupé up a narrow, cobbled side street and switched off the ignition, got out and paced through

shadows to the corner. From here he could see the modern bulk of Reedland & Gorne's office building.

The sight of the empty street brought back memories. It had looked like this three years before, when he had been walking to the subway after a date with Sheila. The pavement was suddenly filled with the ghosts of men who shouted, waved guns and raced for sedans that purred in waiting for them. Most of all, Donegal saw the first hood, a wizened little man, Siggy Swayne, startling him by appearing from the shadows and touching his pocket and saying: "Hurry back."

Shivering a little, Donegal moved like a dark shadow toward the office-building door. The revolving doors were locked, and he scarcely glanced at them. He went around a corner to a small basement door, found it ajar. He paused a moment, scowling, and then stepped into darkness.

Fire escapes led upward, and he took the iron steps. It was a long climb, up to the sixth floor. On the landing he paused again, leaning against the pipe railing until his legs strengthened. He went around an ell on the platform and examined the big fire door. It was propped ajar by a piece of two-by-four. Donegal slipped through it into the corridor.

He waited, his body lowered in a slight crouch.

A man detached himself from the shadows of a nearby office doorway. "Hey, you!"

His voice echoed and rolled through the marble corridor. Footsteps slapped heavily on the smooth floor as the man approached. Donegal moistened his lips; didn't move. The man came nearer, suddenly took distinct form. The night watchman. He was a big, slovenly dressed fellow in a suède jacket and a battered, wide-brimmed hat. He swung his clock in one hand and a dark-lantern in the other. The lens was shuttered.

The watchman said hoarsely: "Stay right where you are, mister. Just like that."

Donegal stood just like that. The man came closer, his head leaning forward as he peered into Donegal's face. He started to raise his lantern, and Donegal decided to move.

Still in his crouch, Donegal swung around on one heel. The watchman started to drop his lantern and reach for a gun in his back pocket. He never got it. Donegal's long arm pounced out as he turned, his bunched knuckles flicking toward the big man's jaw. The lantern fell with a bang. The watchman stumbled, swung his heavy clock by the leather strap. Donegal ducked low and came up fast. The man's chin was out, above him. Donegal swung, and the watchman made a squeaking noise and spread his weight on the marble floor.

Donegal dropped to one knee beside him. Cursing softly, he felt for the man's heavy key ring, lifted it and then walked swiftly down the corridor to a dark door marked: REEDLAND & GORNE. He found the correct key and let himself in.

Reedland's business quarters consisted of four offices: a receptionist's room, a small cubby for the secretary, an office for Stephen Gorne and a large one for Reedland. Donegal went first to the windows. He satisfied himself that the windows looked over the back way, then switched on the lights and began to search.

He opened desk drawers, riffled papers, turned up the rugs, took down framed pictures. He got the files open, probed inside, flicked back memo pads and emptied the wastebaskets. In Reedland's main office, he tried the window blinds and the huge glass-and-metal desk, tapping it all over and measuring it with his fingers, seeking a secret space. He drew a blank at everything. Perhaps fifteen minutes later he straightened up, scowling; and stared at a heavy mahogany door behind a standing screen.

He went over to it, tried the knob, and it turned in his hands. He pushed it gently inward and stood still. Very carefully, he turned on his heel and went back through the business office, locked the corridor door, turned off all the lights and returned to the open door in Reedland's office. He felt for a light switch and stepped inside. He took two paces and stopped dead.

He was in a small, cozily furnished room fitted out as living quarters attached to Reedland's office. There was a soft blue rug, a comfortable studio couch, two bowl-lamps, a framed photograph of Enoch Reedland, and erotic pictures on the wall that deepened Donegal's frown. The far wall was heavily burdened with books. Beside him, to the right, was a small, solid-looking safe on rollers. Deep-cushioned chairs stood about on the blue rug. Donegal took all this in with one swift glance, and then looked at the chair nearest the studio couch.

Atkinson was sitting in this one.

The little insurance dick sat crouched forward, his knees bent and his arms hugging his midsection. His hat lay on the floor beside him; his hair shone smoothly white, somewhat disheveled. He still wore his expensive green trench coat, but it was open now, exposing his lean whippet frame in an equally expensive suit.

The little guy's head jerked up as Donegal put on the lights. His brown eyes glistened. His mouth twitched.

Donegal spanned the floor with a long stride and said grimly: "I see you beat me to it, shamus."

Then he saw the blood. The whole front of the fellow's suit was soaked with it. It came from two holes in his chest, flooding down around him. He wasn't dead. Not yet!

Donegal leaned down sharply and said: "Who did it? Atkinson, can you talk? Who did it?"

The little guy's eyes rolled tiredly. His face was gray. He stared blankly at Donegal's lean, taut features and slowly rolled his head from side to side. His tongue moistened his lips.

"Don't know," he whispered. "Dark in here . . . shot from there . . . doorway."

"Can you move?"

"No!"

Donegal straightened abruptly. "You need a doctor and hospital care. I'll phone for you." He whirled on his heel and started for the outer office. He had his hand on the knob when the little guy's hoarse voice stopped him.

"Wait a minute— You giving yourself up?"

Donegal's face was pale. "You need a doctor, don't you?"

"I don't need . . . anybody. I'm done for." He gestured with his hand and Donegal reluctantly returned. "I can't talk much longer."

"Then don't try."

"Got to. Listen! You know about the . . . green book?" Atkinson's voice was a bubbling whisper. His breath rattled in his throat, and then he straightened a little, managed a crooked, ghastly little grin. "You know about it?"

"I know *of* it," Donegal said.

"Know what it is?"

"No!"

"A million." Atkinson waved a hand weakly. His fingers were smeared with blood. "A cool million for the guy who finds it and uses it. Or you could turn it in to the cops . . . and help break up a racket that takes millions out of the country . . . every year."

Pressure crept slowly along Donegal's nerves. He stood motionless, staring down at the wounded man. His eyes were narrowed, watchful.

"What kind of racket?"

"Bonds," said Atkinson. "You must've guessed that all this . . . this fuss isn't over Reedland's puny fifty grand. It's the green book they're after—the one that everybody thinks you have."

"What about the book?"

Atkinson's voice strengthened. "It's got names, dates, places. The whole works. The outfit, itself, is called the Green Book, too. It smuggles hot bonds out of the country to points in Europe—Holland, mostly. From there they go into Middle Europe where foreign exchange is desperately needed by some of those countries. I'm sure that the business is sponsored and helped along by those governments. We can't do anything over there, of course. The racket has to be stopped here. And the green book in the possession of the police will stop it—like that." He raised his arm and dropped it flat on the side of his chair.

The little man's face was beaded with perspiration. His eyes drooped, sought the floor. His breath hissed between clenched teeth. He leaned farther forward, hugging himself.

Donegal said hoarsely: "I can find the book. I'm not sure, but I think I can put my hands on it in a couple of hours."

"If you can stay alive," Atkinson said.

"I'll stay alive!"

"These people are dangerous. Desperate! The head of the syndicate will use any means to stop that book from getting to the police. You're only alive so far because you can lead them to the book. It proves that they don't know where it is, and they've got to have it. I'm surprised they haven't picked you up and put you through a wringer to find out about it. You've got to watch yourself. Trust nobody!"

Donegal straightened. Excitement was a living, writhing serpent inside him. His blood pounded. This put an entirely new light on the whole business. This was no matter of bond robbery, but something immense, gigantic in scope! And it lay in his hands to clean it up! Softly he pounded his right fist into the palm of his left. Ideas exploded like sky rockets in his mind. He leaned down again, his face grave.

"The kingpin," he demanded. "Do you know who he is?"

Atkinson's head drooped lower. His eyes were closed. The blood had almost stopped coming from his wounds. "Yes—"

"Who?" Donegal rasped.

Atkinson's tongue moistened dry, gray lips. Agony shone in his brown eyes. His throat worked, his hands trembled. He started forward in the chair, made a soft, bubbling noise, and suddenly slipped sidewise, his body stiff. He hit the floor with a thump, before Donegal could catch him.

Donegal didn't touch him. He was dead!

He muttered softly: "All right, little guy—I know who it is. You didn't have to tell me. I know!"

He turned and stared at the framed picture of Enoch Reedland on the small table nearby. He looked at the thin, ivory-tinted face, the dark hair over high, flat temples. He pointed an accusing finger at the photograph.

"You!" he breathed, and a chill went up his spine. "You're the one."

Donegal's hands were trembling when he picked up the office telephone. His face was pale, his eyes danced with little flames behind their grayness. He dialed a number and waited, staring at a clock on the secretary's desk. It was close to two in the morning. It would be dawn in four hours, and he had much to do. He had to struggle with the excitement that threatened to engulf him. Then a maid's voice came sharply in the telephone receiver:

"Mr. Reedland's residence."

The maid's voice was neither sleepy nor irritated. It was high and shrill with incipient hysteria. Donegal's fingers tightened about the phone. A chill settled in him.

"Will you please get—" he began.

Then Lieutenant Denby's voice came, swift and

low and furious: "Who is this? Dammit, speak up! Who is it?"

Donegal was silent for several seconds. The chill inside him congealed into a lump of icy uncertainty. A distant fear shone in his eyes.

He said softly: "Hello, Sam. This is Donegal—Babe Donegal."

The lieutenant launched on a stream of bitter profanity. "You can't keep this up, you know. You'll have to come in sooner or later!"

"I'm doing all right so far."

"You bet you are! You bet!"

Donegal swallowed a burning lump in his throat. "Look," he said, "what are you doing there?"

"I'll let you know when I see you!"

"You won't be seeing me," Donegal said. "Not for a while. Is Sheila there?"

"Oh, so she was here, too, was she?"

Donegal's face whitened. "Isn't she there?" he asked dully.

"No—" There was a pause, while Lieutenant Denby apparently shot orders to another cop to trace the call. "Where are you now, Donegal? There's no use in your trying to dodge around forever. Come on in, and we'll talk it out."

Donegal's hands were trembling. "Listen, Sam—this is important. I'm not fooling, now. If you think I ought to come in, I will. But if Sheila is missing, I won't show until either you find her or I do. Look, is Reedland at home?"

The lieutenant's voice came hard. "Oh, sure; he's here."

Donegal took a fresh grip on the telephone. He said: "Well, hold him! He's the man you want. He hired Archie Zell to kill Schiller and just came here and knocked off Atkinson!"

"Who?"

"The insurance snoop. I'm at Reedland's office. No use sending the prowlies after me, Sam. I won't be here when they come."

Denby rapped: "Reedland didn't knock off Atkinson, or snatch your girl, either."

Donegal said: "But he did! It all fits together! He killed Atkinson and hired Archie Zell—"

"The hell he did!" said the lieutenant softly. "Reedland is right here. But—"

"But what?"

"He's dead!"

"Dead?" Donegal's eyes mirrored quick astonishment, incredulous disbelief. In a flash he saw his whole case collapse. "Dead?"

"Knifed through the heart while sleeping in his room. There was a little struggle. This makes the second corpse your girl friend scrammed away from. You and her, both. But I checked on Reedland's teeth, and they're false. If his dentist says he once had a gold tooth cap, then you may be in the clear. You'd better do as I say and come in. He's the one you wanted, Babe."

Donegal said flatly: "Sure, Reedland engineered the job of stealing his own bonds. But he didn't hire Archie Zell to kill Harry Schiller, and he couldn't have killed Atkinson."

"Now, listen, Babe!" Denby yelled. His voice was frantic. "Babe, you come on in. You hear me, Babe? Come on in, and I'll—"

Donegal wasn't listening. He dropped the phone softly back on the cradle, stood still for several moments in the lighted office. His face was ashen, and his nostrils looked pinched. He reached in his topcoat pocket and lifted out the lieutenant's Police Positive. He broke it open, examined it to see that it was fully loaded, and then snapped it shut, replaced it in his pocket. A light began to glow far back in his eyes. Unconsciously his jaw was thrust forward a little, and muscles made hard knots in his cheek. He went to the office door, snapped off the light, and stepped through into the corridor.

He caught only a glimpse of the man who was waiting there. Metal flashed above his head, and then a gun butt crashed on his forehead. The blow riveted red pain through his skull. Donegal fell forward, aware of choking, infuriating despair. A foot kicked at him. He tried to reach his gun. The man brought down the sap again.

Donegal flattened on the cool marble floor and all the lights went out.

VIII.

From a vast distance Donegal heard a voice saying coldly: "To hell with you! I won't! To hell with you!" He was doing the talking, himself. His voice sounded low and unnatural in his own ears, harsh with bitter fury.

He was tied hand and foot to a solid oak chair. His body ached and throbbed. His throat was dry and his stomach bobbed around like a cork in a stormy sea.

There were two men and a woman in the room with him. The woman was Norma Schiller. She sat on a couch across from him, smoking a cigarette, her pale-jade eyes watching him from under lowered lids. Her cameo face was lovely, cold and cruel. Her mouth was set in bitter red lines.

The two men were hoods. One was big and fat, with a bald head and pale, milky eyes. The other was tall and thin, his long face cadaverous.

Norma Schiller spoke softly: "You'd better come through, Donegal. You're a screwy kid. Tell us what you know. Tell us about the bonds and the green book. Where are they?"

"I don't know," Donegal said.

The woman leaned forward a little. "We can make you talk," she whispered.

"To hell with you. Where is Sheila? Why'd you bump off Atkinson and Reedland?"

The big fat man looked at the woman impatiently, looked at Donegal and licked his lips. He took a length of rubber garden hose from behind a chair. Donegal didn't glance at him. His eyes were focus-

"We can make you talk," Norma Schiller whispered. Donegal snapped: "To hell with you! Where's Sheila?"

ing better, and he could make out the room. It was a stock room, loaded with racks of bottled liquor. He assumed he was in the Cameo Club. He wondered what time it was.

Norma Schiller said casually: "Cut him loose, Gene. See how much he spills."

The thin man cut Donegal's bonds, yanked the chair back and forced Donegal to his feet. The fat man catfooted closer and suddenly swung his hose. It caught Donegal across the shoulders, staggered him. The thin man pulled a gun and sat down near Norma Schiller.

Donegal straightened. "Listen, I don't know where the green book is. I don't know who knocked off Reedland or Atkinson, unless it was Archie Zell. I don't—"

The fat man swung his hose again. Donegal whirled in white fury and jumped for it. The fat man was taken by surprise. He missed with the hose and took a step backward; and a smear of red replaced his button nose as Donegal's fist smashed into his face.

A weight landed explosively on Donegal's back. It was the thin man. A gun butt swiped viciously at the back of his head, and Donegal relaxed his grip on the fat guy's throat and stumbled blindly forward. A gun bloomed in Norma Schiller's long fingers. The thin man whipped him again with the gun and Donegal went down to his hands and knees. The room whirled dizzily around him.

The fat guy came over, holding his broken nose, and kicked Donegal in the ribs. The thin man drove his heel into the back of Donegal's neck. Donegal went out—

Next time, when he came to, it was matches. Lighted matches on his bare feet. The fat man did most of the work, and he seemed to enjoy it.

The thin man was drinking moodily. Norma Schiller wasn't around. Donegal had ten minutes of consciousness this time.

"He's pretty tough," said the fat man.

"Yeah!" agreed the thin man.

The third time Donegal came to, the little finger on his left hand ached and throbbed. The thin guy held a blood-stained knife, and Donegal stared at his left hand, saw that the finger had been slashed to the bone. Norma Schiller came across the room, her tall figure swaying. She splashed water into Donegal's face. She was careful not to soil her green dress.

Donegal looked around for a window. There was none. He looked for a door. There was one beside Norma Schiller's seat on the couch. The latch chain dangled open. Donegal got up out of the chair and walked halfway across the room. His face was gray and set.

"Where you going?" asked the fat man.

"Out!"

The fat man kicked Donegal up high, and as Donegal doubled forward in mute pain, his pudgy fist smacked into Donegal's face. Donegal flailed blindly forward. His right hit the fat man high on the cheek and rocked him. His left caught the fat man's jaw and put him down.

The thin guy cursed in sudden alarm and dragged out a large .45. Norma Schiller stood up again. A crooked little smile twisted her red lips. Her green eyes were filled with bitter hatred.

Donegal staggered from his course and went for the thin man. The hood stared open-mouthed and raised his gun, looked wildly at Norma Schiller. She nodded. The hood fired!

Donegal tackled the thin man with an awkward, clumsy leap, just above the knees. He fell heavily, clawed his way over the man's body and reached for his ears. He got his fingers on them and lifted the thin man's head, suddenly banged it down on the floor. The hood kicked feebly. He tried to bring his gun around to bear on Donegal's body, on top of him. Donegal banged his head again. The big .45 went off with a roar and a bullet punched a hole in the ceiling.

Two guns were poked simultaneously into Donegal's ribs. Norma Schiller held one of them; the fat man held the other.

Donegal rolled off the thin guy and lay flat on his back on the floor, his chest pumping as he sucked air into his lungs. His eyes were fixed blindly on the ceiling light.

The fat man burbled: "I'm gonna give it to him."

Norma Schiller said: "No, he'll talk yet."

"The hell with you; he busted my nose. I'm gonna give it to him."

The fat man was grinning. He raised his gun and pointed it at Donegal, on the floor. Donegal didn't even see it. His face had turned a deeper gray. His breath made rattling sounds deep in his throat.

Norma Schiller nodded.

The fat man's pudgy knuckles whitened around the trigger!

A voice said from the doorway: "Hello, hello, hello!" It was a cheerful, amiable voice. "And good morning to you. Kindly hold that pose, folks, or I'll scatter your insides across those elegant bottles, yonder."

Steve Gorne stood braced inside the doorway. His feet were spread wide apart, almost the width of the door. He clutched a gun in both hands and waggled it to cover everybody in the room. His grin was hard and fixed, his blue eyes twinkling. He looked like a mischievous drunken schoolboy just completing a practical joke.

Norma Schiller said tightly: "Steve, you get out of here."

"Now, now, Norma. Is that the way to treat a star customer? Even if it is after hours, I'm a good customer."

"Get out! You're drunk. You'll get hurt, you fool."

"I don't wanna get out. I'm looking for Babe Donegal. Now I found him, and we'll both go out. We gotta go to a place, him and me. Away off yonder."

Norma Schiller's green eyes narrowed. She still held her little gun in her hand. The fat man was grinning, but it was an empty, frozen grin. The thin man groaned and stirred, sat up on the floor. Donegal got to his feet and picked up the thin man's .45.

"Let's go, Steve," he said.

Norma Schiller's gun jerked up. "You can't do it. I've got a dozen other men, outside. You'll never get through, either of you."

Steve Gorne grinned. His rocky face was pleasant. His blue eyes blurred for a moment and he swayed forward a little, straightened with an effort. He was very drunk. He said:

"Oh, but you see, there's help for me outside, too. How do you like that, my little cabbage?"

"You're alone, you fool."

Gorne shook his head, waggled the gun. "Oh, no. Not alone. There are cops outside. Hundreds and hundreds of cops. They're here after my old pal, Babe Donegal. They're all around the jernt."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

"I wouldst not, my love."

Norma Schiller's face was pale. Her red lips twitched. She looked uncertainly at the fat man, and the fat man grinned, stretching his lips thin, raised his gun and fired at Steve Gorne in the doorway. The gun banged loud in the stillness! The bullet splintered wood from the door jamb.

Steve Gorne grinned and let go, squeezing the trigger with both hands. Three slugs punched into

the fat man. The fat man dropped his gun and melted to the floor.

The thin hood yelled. Norma Schiller raised her gun and fired at Donegal, and missed. Donegal took one shot at the ceiling light and there was sudden darkness.

Somebody groaned.

Nobody moved.

Through the stillness came a sudden yell and a splintering sound of axes on wood. A cop's whistle shrieked. Donegal heard Norma Schiller suck air, and then a hand was on his arm and Steve Gorne whispering: "Come on, Babe. Let us fly from hither to thither."

Gun flame lanced yellow from a corner of the room, where the thin man crouched. A bottle tinkled and liquor gurgled and Steve Gorne yelped, followed Donegal to the door.

"Hurt?" Donegal rapped.

"Oh, no. Just thought of the good liquor wasted."

A body hurtled into Donegal! He swung his gun, felt it sink into the thin man's face. The thin man slumped down.

They got out into the corridor, slamming the door behind them. There was a doorway at each end. One door was covered by a beaded curtain, and this was thrust aside and a cop stood there with a riot gun. Behind him, Donegal glimpsed the bandshell of the Cameo Club. Two more cops were clambering up over it. The cop with the riot gun raised it and Donegal fell flat, skidding on his hands toward the opposite door.

"You, Donegal! Stop!"

Gorne catapulted through the doorway after Donegal. They were on a fire-escape landing, concrete steps going up. A burst of shots sounded behind them!

Donegal and Gorne raced up the steps.

The thin, ratty face of a hood met them on the second-floor landing. Gorne loosed a wild yell and threw his big gun at the hood's face. The punk threw up his hands and tumbled down the concrete steps with a series of hard bumps. Gorne stood aside, doffing his porkpie hat as the man rolled past.

"Such goings on," he chuckled. "Fare thee well."

Donegal said grimly: "You're getting yourself in a bucket, Steve."

Gorne grinned happily. "It's fun," he chuckled. He cursed suddenly as heavy shoes pounded the staircase below them. A cop's uniform cap bobbed in the dim night light. There were others below him. Gorne turned and went down the hall, toward the closed gambling rooms, with Donegal beside him. There was a window here, overlooking the wide gravel parking lot. Gorne threw it open, peered out, lifted one leg over the sill and jumped, disappeared.

Donegal cursed. "Steve!"

The cops were almost at the head of the fire escape. Donegal leaped for the window, looked down, thrust his legs over and let go. He landed with a bounce on the open seat of an empty prowl car. Gorne was already inside, reaching on the floor for a machine gun. He was chuckling happily as Donegal settled behind the wheel.

The gravel lot was gray with early-morning mist. Lights glowed with multicolored rings around them. There were other police cars, all deserted, but as Donegal slammed his foot on the starter three cops boiled out of the Cameo Club entrance. Shots greeted them as some of the Schiller mobsters found themselves trapped in the open. One of the hoods braced himself and let fly at the surprised cops, his gun racketing. The uniformed men dropped flat on the damp gravel, yanking desperately for their guns.

Donegal yelled: "Take 'em, Steve!"

He shot the cop car into first, spun the wheel and the powerful roadster roared, swung away from the wall and headed toward the startled mobsters. Steve Gorne raised the machine gun, fumbled for the trigger and leaned forward. The stutter gun racketed violently and the sandy-haired man was flung back against the leather seat. Bullets screamed wildly from the rattling muzzle of the gun. The hoods yelped in fear and dived for the ground.

Gorne yelled wildly and turned the gun on the Cameo Club marquee as they swayed past. Glass tinkled and shattered, bullets dug huge pits in the stucco wall. Gorne lifted his feet, braced them against the dashboard, and twisted around in his seat to keep his aim as Donegal headed the prowl car for the street. He shot through the parking-lot gates, missing the fence by a fractional inch.

Steve Gorne settled back in the seat, hugging the hot gun. "Oh, boy; oh, boy!" he breathed. "What a baby! Have we got something here, or have we got something!"

"A hot potato," Donegal muttered grimly. "And the sooner we drop it, the better."

He tooled the prowl car at fifty miles an hour down the deserted, mist-streaked boulevard.

"Where are we going?" Gorne yelled. "We got a place to go?"

Donegal said: "We're going to spoil a bartender's beauty sleep."

It was after five when Donegal drove carefully down Merchant Street and turned the corner into K. The avenue was utterly deserted. Mist hung in thin streamers over the ghostly pavements. He glanced sidewise at Steve Gorne, and the man had his head tilted back, his porkpie hat over his eyes. He was snoring gently, the machine gun cradled in his lap.

The radio was droning softly:

"Attention, all cars! Attention! Be on the lookout for Number 19, stolen fifteen minutes ago from in front of the Cameo Club. Attention—"

Donegal swore softly, turned off the radio and edged the prowl car into a narrow side street. The dark shadows hid them from sight of any passing car on K. Donegal twisted around, stared for a long minute at the sleeping man beside him, then shrugged and got silently out of the car. He winced as his burned, blistered feet took his weight.

Limping, he went to the wide avenue, passed the Reedland building and paused on the corner. A small overhead sign read: EVERGREEN CLUB. If Norma Schiller's knowledge was correct, this was the place formerly known as Hurry-Back Harry's. And if Donegal's knowledge of bartenders was correct, he would find Choo-Choo Travis living in a room over the joint.

He was correct on both counts.

A side door opened on a grimy flight of stairs, and this in turn led to a hall buttered with dim light from a fly-blown bulb. There was only one door, and Donegal tried it with careful fingers. It wasn't locked.

"Luck," he breathed.

He stepped quickly inside. The air in the room was close, musty. He stood for a moment until his eyes were adjusted to the dim light filtering through the window. He was in a bedroom. He could dimly make out a large bulk on the bed, and deep sounds of snoring. When he could see fairly well, he closed the door—and his elbow bumped an invisible lamp beside him and it crashed deafeningly to the floor.

Donegal yanked his gun.

The bedsprings creaked. The sleeping man awoke with a grunt, sat up, cursed softly and then froze as Donegal said quietly:

"Hold it. Like that."

The man held it. He sat up with his legs under the covers and leaned his elbows on his knees, his chin on his folded forearms. His eyes glistened in the gloom. He moistened his lips, said softly:

"Your error, pal. I don't keep no dough up here. I got a wallet in my pants pocket, and it's got a deuce in it. Take it and lemme sleep."

"I don't want that," Donegal said. He crossed the room and pulled out a chair from the wall and got off his tortured feet. He kept the gun in his hand. "I just want a little information."

"Sure, anything to oblige. With me it's business hours all the time. At five in the morning and any time. With a gun, too. Go read the figures on my two-buck bill, pal, and lemme sleep."

"I want to find Choo-Choo Travis," said Donegal.

The big man kept his arms around his knees and twisted his head to stare at Donegal's dim figure. "And who wants him?"

"I do."

"What for?"

"I'd like to talk to him. Norma Schiller sent me here."

The man's eyes widened a bit. He made clicking noises with his tongue. "That's a little different, son."

Donegal said: "Well, where can I find Travis?"

"You've found him," said the big man.

Donegal resisted an impulse to kick his face in. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"I'm bashful. Come to the point."

Donegal said: "It's about the furniture your joint had when it used to be Hurry-Back Harry's. Where is it?"

"The furniture? The cops took that, but Harry Schiller got it back." The bedsprings creaked and twanged as the big man shifted his weight. He glanced obliquely at Donegal's gun. "I hear Schiller got his from that kid he framed accidentally, three years ago. That screw-ball rookie."

"Yeah!" Donegal's grin was hard and fixed. "What happened to the furniture after the cops gave it back to Schiller?"

The man said: "I don't remember, pal. Who wants to know?"

Donegal took a chance, said: "Norma wants to know. She wants to know in a hurry."

"Oh! Well, sure, I remember now. The Complete Storage outfit got it. They still hold it, for all I know. That was special furniture, you know. Special tables and such, just in case the cops crossed us and blew in when we weren't looking. Old-fashioned stuff."

Donegal said: "I know all about that." He got up from the chair, wincing as pain shot through his blistered feet. He limped carefully to the door.

The man in the bed called him back. He leaned forward, still hugging his knees, said: "Between you 'n' me, now, pal—ain't you glad Schiller got his?"

"No, I'm not."

"That's very funny. I thought you might be glad about it."

"Why should I be?"

"You look like a guy who might be called Babe Donegal." When Donegal's gun jumped up, the big man drawled: "Blow kid, blow. I need my beauty sleep. Besides, I hate to be a rat. Just remember Choo-Choo Travis when you're through, will you?" He yawned mightily.

Donegal muttered an incredulous "Thanks," and got out of there in a hurry.

The cool morning breeze slapped his cheek as he limped down the street to the hidden prowl car.

Steve Gorne wasn't in it. The riot gun lay across the seat, and the opposite door was open. Donegal limped twenty paces up the driveway, peering into

the thick shadows, and then went to the corner of Merchant Street and looked in the recessed doorways there. Steve Gorne wasn't around.

Cursing softly, Donegal slid behind the wheel and tooled the cop car out of the narrow street, pointed it toward the manufacturing district that bordered the river.

IX.

Half of the Complete Storage Building stood on a pier jutting out over the river. It was built of brick and stone along a dead-end street that ended in a three-foot concrete wall overlooking the oily water.

The fourth window he tried shoved inward with just a faint creak. Donegal climbed up with a foothold on the drain spot, wriggled over the broad stone sill and dropped to the floor. There was no sign of a watchman. He moved forward through the faint light that seeped in from the street.

He had expected some difficulty finding the furniture he wanted, but he had no trouble with this. Over in one corner of a vast room on the second floor glowed a bright circle of light. It waved, dipped, and finally settled on a round, green-top table. Boxes and crates had been ripped open, displaying other gambling tables.

They all looked as though they had been broken in half. Between the green top and the wooden bottom there was a slotlike space about two inches high. There was nothing surprising to Donegal about these tables. Little dives behind cigar stores had used them to dump money and chips when the cops paid sudden calls.

The flashlight was playing on the last of the tables. A dim shape stood over it, working with a screwdriver to uncrate it. The job was almost done. It was finished by the time Donegal crept closer, gun in hand.

The man with the torch gave a soft, exultant exclamation. He pulled papers from the false bottom of the table, shifted his flash to his left hand and held the papers up to study them. From where Donegal stood motionless in the shadows he could see the engraving of bonds. The man riffled them, and a little green book, such as you might buy in a dime store, dropped to the floor. The man put down the stolen bonds and stooped for the book.

The gun in Donegal's hand felt hot and sticky.

He said softly: "Hold it, Steve."

The man with the flashlight froze in his crouching position. He didn't move at all. He said: "Who is it?" in a harsh, strangled voice.

"Babe Donegal. And I've got a gun. Put the torch down and don't go for anything. Take your hand off that crate and move a step to the left."

Steve Gorne did this, and then turned slowly. His thin, pleasant face was dim in the dawning light. He chuckled throatily. He wasn't drunk.

"Hell, Babe, I just beat you to it."

Donegal spoke slowly, measuring his words. "You followed me upstairs to Travis' and listened in and then you came here ahead of me. That's why you pulled me out of Norma Schiller's hands. You wanted to be with me on that move."

Steve Gorne said softly: "There's no harm in recovering my own property, is there? After all, with Reedland dead, all this stuff is mine."

"How did you know Reedland was dead?" Donegal rapped sharply. "You've been at the Cameo Club all night, according to your word. And *I* didn't tell you."

Gorne put the torch down on the crate and smiled. Beads of moisture shone on his temples.

Donegal said bluntly: "You know Reedland is dead—because you killed him!"

"You crazy guy," Gorne whispered.

"Reedland didn't even know the real score, did he? He was after the fifty grand in bonds and couldn't see the real thing, could he? He didn't know anything about the green book, about the bond-smuggling racket you ran under cover of Reedland's business name. Your spot as a junior partner in the firm hid you perfectly. You thought Reedland was honest, though—and he crossed you by turning crooked.

"Reedland hired Schiller to steal those bonds, three years ago. He planned to collect double, from Central Indemnity and still have the bonds. But Schiller also took the green book *you* had in the office—and it exposed your million-a-year racket. When Siggy Swayne was killed after hiding both the bonds and the book, everything was left up in the air. For three years you and Reedland and Schiller played a three-cornered waiting game—waiting for me to come out. You all thought that Siggy had given the stuff to me."

Steve Gorne was smiling very faintly. His sandy hair was looped low over his forehead.

Donegal pounded on: "Schiller tried to muscle in or blackmail you, knowing about the green book. But you demanded proof of what he had, and he couldn't do that without the book, so you were willing to wait until I got out, today. And what did I do? I went straight to the cops. I went to see Lieutenant Denby, but you and Reedland didn't know why. Reedland was still ignorant of the book; he was simply playing for the fifty grand in bonds. You figured then that I didn't have the bonds after all, having gone to the cops; so you reasoned that Schiller had double-crossed you with a song and dance about my having the stuff. Since he knew so much and still threatened blackmail, you had to kill him.

"Schiller didn't know what to make of any of it. You arranged for him to meet you and me in Sheila's apartment and talk it out. Then you hired Archie Zell to turn on his boss and shoot him down. A man like Zell knows no loyalties; he sold out to the highest bidder—which was you. I was

an easy peg to drape a frame on. I'd aired off a lot about getting Schiller. I was a natural fall-guy, and you took advantage of it to set the scene in Sheila's flat.

"After that you figured maybe Reedland wasn't so dumb after all. Maybe Reedland had the book and was simply waiting a favorable moment to cash in on it. So you slipped into his house, not knowing Sheila and I were there, and tried to get the truth out of him. You probably had to kill him to prevent him from shouting and raising an alarm. From there you went to your office, thinking to search Reedland's apartment, there. You found Atkinson already looking, and you shot him. I arrived after you left, and Norma's hoods sapped me."

Stephen Gorne turned his head, and the sharp shadows on his face rearranged themselves. He glanced at the flashlight, at the little green book on the floor at his feet. He smiled, thinned his lips.

"You're talking nonsense. You're building castles in air."

"Prison bars!" Donegal corrected. "And a chair, for you."

"What makes you so sure it's me, Babe?"

"You knew Reedland was dead when you weren't supposed to know. At first I figured it was Reedland, he was so frantically anxious to help me. I knew it was one of you two, since the book had been stolen from there. Then, you were anxious to be with me, too, in a subtler way, pretending to be drunk. I was your last hope of finding that book.

"Reedland didn't know about it, as I said—he thought I was just babbling when I mentioned it. You didn't think I knew about it, either. But Atkinson wasn't dead when you left him! He told me; he told me all about it, Gorne. You killed him, you killed Reedland, and you hired Archie Zell to kill Schiller. You made a regular carnival out of tonight's work."

Stephen Gorne shrugged wide shoulders. He was still smiling twitchily. "All right," he whispered; "between you and me—you've got it figured closely. So what? Remember, I've got your girl. She saw me when I came out of Reedland's room and I forced her to come along with me. Sheila is with Archie Zell, and"—his smile broadened—"Archie Zell is right behind you, Babe."

Zell's voice came at Donegal's back, like a chill breath of wind. "I thought I'd see what's keepin' you, Steve. I tied the dame up."

Gorne grinned at Donegal. "You see?" He started to lower his hands and reached for his gun.

Donegal rapped sharply: "Keep them up!" He didn't turn to look at the gunman behind him. He spoke to Zell over his shoulder. "Remember I've got a gun on Steve."

"Yeah," Archie Zell drawled. "But I'm behind you. I can take one step and be out the door and after your girl friend. She's a nice dish. I like 'em like that. You wouldn't give her to me for the sake of plugging Steve, would you? If you turned when I leave, Steve'd get you. And if you stay like you are, I'll plug you. So drop your gun."

Donegal stood there and felt icy perspiration come out on his brow. He stood very still. He kept his gun on Gorne while seconds ticked frantically by. All around was the gloom and chill of the big storage room. The windows were dim rectangles, now, gray with the coming dawn. The short hairs at the nape of his neck prickled.

Steve Gorne's face was creased in a gargoyle's smile in the glow of the flashlight. Archie Zell sighed, shifted his weight behind Donegal, and clicked off the safety catch of his big automatic—

And then a giggle came out of the darkness.

The giggle was high-pitched, flutey, with an undertone of mad hysteria in it that sent ice through Donegal's veins. A chill whispered up his spine.

Norma Schiller stepped into the range of light. She was wearing her black felt hat and a short checked coat. She cradled a submachine gun under her arm, swinging it to cover the three men. A muscle twitched insistently at the scarlet of her mouth, pulling her lips into a vicious, zigzag line. Her pale-jade eyes glowed catlike in the reflection of the flashlight.

She giggled again. "Everybody drop everything. I can spray you all with this chopper. I got it out of Babe's cop car."

Neither Gorne nor Zell moved. Donegal turned just a little, very carefully, and looked at the big blond gunman. His face had gone pasty-gray. His long arms dangled limply at his sides, and his big automatic was pointed at the floor. Fear curled and twisted in his topaz eyes. The flat planes of his face twitched.

Norma Schiller swung her gun to cover the man. Then her green eyes jerked to Donegal.

"Step away from him, Babe. I don't know just how damned innocent you really are. But as long as Harry gave his life for the stuff here, I guess the widow ought to have it."

She giggled a third time, a crescendo of bubbling, blood-chilling sounds that echoed through the empty reaches of the warehouse. She turned back to Archie Zell.

"And you, you— Harry trusted you like you were brothers. And you burned him down!"

Archie Zell moistened his lips, whispered hoarsely: "No, listen, Norma. Listen!"

The tall girl's face hardened.

"You filthy rat," she said softly. "You get—*this!*"

The gun suddenly leaped and exploded into a chattering uproar in her hands. The noise of it was deafening as flame spurted in little repetitive

bursts from the muzzle.

Archie Zell screamed in terror and pain. His big body jerked. His heavy automatic crashed out a single reply. Gorne jumped for his revolver on the crate behind him, his face convulsed. Donegal leaped for him, knocking his clawing hand aside. His fist flashed out, caught Gorne's jaw, and the man skittered backward and fell flat. Donegal dropped to the floor.

Plaster dust floated lazily from the high ceiling. Norma Schiller braced herself, her eyes narrowed to bitter slits of jade. Her body jerked as one of Zell's slugs found her. She tripped and stumbled forward and went down to her knees, still gripping the gun. She raised it and squeezed the trigger again.

Zell screamed and spun around, his legs twisting bonelessly. He crashed stiffly to the floor.

Something moved in the doorway, beyond. Donegal caught a momentary sheen of metal, then a tall, dark-faced figure. It was Lieutenant Denby.

He stood with feet apart and a gun in his right hand. He fired once, and the chatter gun in Norma Schiller's arms spun out of her grip, clattered to the floor.

Denby yelled suddenly: "Babe! Look out!"

Donegal spun around, saw that Steve Gorne had pulled himself up and gotten his revolver from the crate. There wasn't anything pleasant about the sandy-haired man now. His lips were drawn back in a tight, desperate grin, baring his teeth. He hesitated, uncertain where to fire. His first slug caught the lieutenant in the arm. The lieutenant groaned and dropped his gun. Blood spurted down his fingertips. Gorne leaped forward suddenly, grabbed at Norma Schiller.

"Hold it, everybody," he gasped. "You'll only kill her."

Norma Schiller's lips gushed red. "Shoot him," she whispered. "Never mind me. Get him!"

Gorne backed away. Behind him was a long gray corridor, walled in by boxes and crates that reached to the high ceiling. He started down this, his gun over the woman's shoulder, dragging her forcibly with him as a shield.

Lieutenant Denby clutched his shattered arm. "Donegal! Babe, for God's sake—shoot!"

Simultaneously Gorne's pistol crashed. The slug hit Donegal's leg, knocked it out from under him with explosive force. Pain seared his thigh. He came down on one knee, hard, and felt sticky warmth along his calf. His throat was dry, his heart pounded, and the gun in his hand weighed a ton. "Three years ago," Donegal thought crazily. "Three years ago, a gun in my hand—like this—"

From a vast distance Donegal heard the lieutenant's voice again. "Babe, *shoot!*"

Donegal raised the gun. His eyes were blurred. He waited a moment, feeling his palms sticky with perspiration. Gorne was halfway down the long aisle, the woman in front of him. His white face was visible over her shoulder, his gun turning to cover Donegal.

Donegal struggled to one elbow, took careful aim —and squeezed the trigger.

A black spot appeared in the center of Stephen Gorne's forehead. Both the man and the woman collapsed suddenly!

Donegal dropped the gun and lay on his face, a pounding in his temples. He couldn't move; his leg was numb with shock. He was shivering all over. He didn't feel so good—but he didn't feel too bad, either, he thought hazily.

Denby got up and came over to him, his shattered arm swinging uselessly at his side. His voice came to Donegal above a wailing of sirens. Donegal heard McQuade talking, and other voices, familiar voices, those of the homicide squad. Above them all he heard Lieutenant Denby say:

"I heard the whole thing. Babe was right all along. It was Stephen Gorne. Me, I couldn't shoot, my arm's busted. The damned killer would have gotten clean away if it hadn't been for Babe. And him banged up and burned and with a hole in his leg."

There was more like that, a lot of it, and then McQuade's red face bent over him. The sergeant's voice came soothingly: "You all right, Babe? It's not too bad. You're O. K., huh?"

Donegal said: "Sure, Tarheel, I'm all right."

"Babe, you used your gun, didn't you? It didn't bother you too much, did it?"

"Not too much," Donegal said.

McQuade's big stubby fingers kneaded Donegal's shoulder. "Listen, Babe." His voice was hoarse. "Once this gets cleaned up, you'll join the force again, won't you? We can't give you back the three years you lost—but you'll join again. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Babe?" His big fingers kept working at Donegal's shoulder.

"I'd like that," Donegal agreed, and he grinned.

"That's great," said McQuade. "Just great!" He paused. "We tailed you most of the night, waiting for a break. We found the prowl car you . . . uh . . . borrowed, and came running. But you did it yourself, Babe. All by yourself."

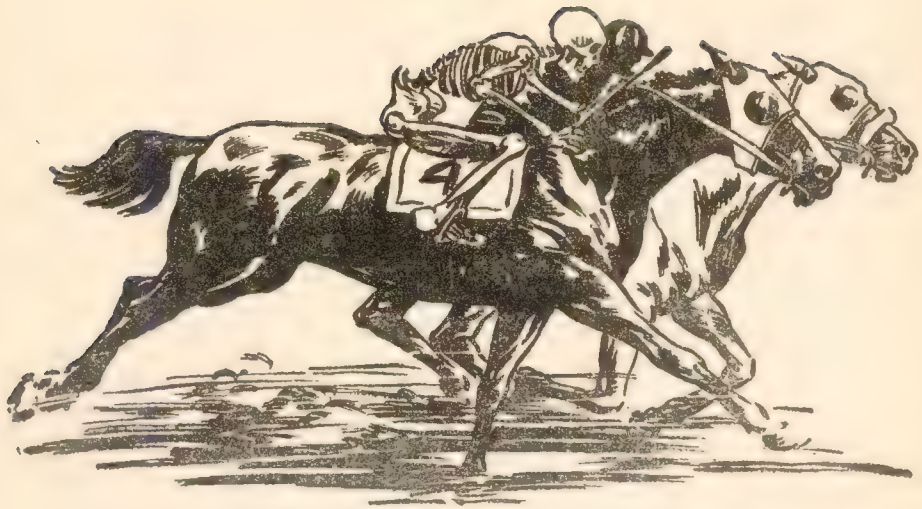
Donegal whispered: "How about Sheila? Is she all right? Is she here?"

"Sure, Babe, she's right here."

Then Sheila took McQuade's place and started talking to him and running her fingers through his hair; and Donegal felt all the tension slowly ease out of him.

Donegal felt fine.

THE END.



HEX ON HORSEBACK

by NORBERT DAVIS

Hexing was all right—but not on Mr. Foxie, who was insured for $150,000.00 and ate his meals in the stable!

I.

James Daye was sitting in a sagging rawhide chair with his feet up on the rickety railing of the front porch. Below him the land fell away in a series of gracefully long, undulating rolls, with the blue tips of the pine trees moving in soft stirring unison. It was an incredibly beautiful view and Daye sighed in deep contentment, looking at it through half-closed eyes.

Hob Nule came out of the front door and yawned noisily twice. He was a fat, short man with a sun-reddened bald head. He wore a ragged blue shirt and stained khaki trousers, and he was carrying a white stone jug in his right hand.

"Right pert mornin'," he said, yawning again.

"Right pert," Daye agreed gravely.

"Goin' to go a-hikin' and a-walkin' after breakfast?"

Daye nodded. "Yes. Over that way."

"Nothin' there," said Hob. "Not a durn thing but pines and brush and such stuff."

"I know. That's why I want to go there."

Hob shrugged. "Well, everybody to their own tastes, I says." He held the jug up to his ear and shook it experimentally. "Want a drink to start the day off right?"

Daye shivered. "A drink of that corrosive acid? No, thanks."

"It's a mite strong," Hob admitted. He tipped the jug up and swallowed several times, put it down again. "But it's great stuff when you gets used to it." He tilted his head suddenly, listening. "Somebody comin' on the back road."

Daye listened, too, trying to concentrate all his attention, but he could hear nothing except the soft whisper of the morning breeze in the pines.

"It's old Nippy Cooper," said Hob. "I can tell that rattletrap of his."

Daye heard the sound now, finally. It was the

faint, incoherent stutter of a car motor. It grew gradually louder as the car labored up the long slope toward Hob's cabin, and finally a swaybacked old touring car bumped around the turn in the road and stopped beside the front veranda while its engine emitted burning gasps of steam that slowly subsided to interior rumblings.

"Hi, Nippy," said Hob. "Up and about kinda early, ain't you?"

Nippy Cooper was untangling himself from behind the steering wheel. He was a long, gangling man with a thin, inquisitively quivering nose. He wore overalls and a straw hat with the brim ripped off in front.

"Howdy, Hob," he said, climbing up the steps to the porch. He nodded gravely at Daye. "Your name would be Daye, wouldn't it? James A. Daye?"

"Yes," said Daye.

"Got a telegram for you." Nippy drew a battered and crushed yellow envelope out of the pocket in the bib of his overalls. "Come in down to the town two or three days ago."

"Only two or three days ago?" Daye asked, taking it. "You're giving me pretty snappy service, aren't you?"

"Fact," Nippy admitted. "Old Ike—he's the agent—he don't usually deliver. Figures if it's important, you'll come and get it yourself. But Mirandy—that's my wife—was taken with the shakin' ague night before last, and when Mirandy gets the shakin' ague, there ain't a thing that'll do her a mite of good but a little of old Leaper Roberts' white corny whiskey. I was comin' up anyway to see about gettin' some, and so old Ike says I might as well fetch this along."

"Thanks," Daye said.

Nippy waved his hand. "It's all right. Glad to do a favor. Hob, you know if old Leaper has run any white corny whiskey lately?"

"Yup," said Hob, indicating the jug. "Brought me down some to try out come last Wednesday."

Nippy licked his lips. "He get a good run?"

"Mighty good," said Hob. "Try her."

"Don't mind," said Nippy. He grasped the jug, swung it up on the crook of his elbow, and swallowed repeatedly.

Daye had opened the telegram and was reading it. The message, typed in uncertain, straggling lines, read:

YOUVE HAD ENOUGH VACATION AND SEEN ENOUGH BIRDS AND BEES AND TREES SO HOWS ABOUT GOING TO WORK STOP WE ARE ON MR FOXIE FOR ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY GRAND AND HE IS NOW HOLED UP AT PLACE CALLED SHADOWS AND I HEAR THERE IS DIRTY WORK IN THE OFFING STOP GO THERE AND LOOK AROUND AND SEE IF YOU CAN GET US OFF THAT RISK STOP RIGHT NOW STOP

ANDERSON

Daye swore to himself with quiet emphasis. He was a young man, thick-shouldered and powerful-looking, with brown hair and blue eyes that were wide set and had a humorous, keenly observing twinkle in them.

Nippy put down the jug reluctantly. "What's all that mean?" he asked curiously.

Daye looked up. "Did you read it?"

"Oh, certain," said Nippy. "Me and Ike puzzled over it for quite some time. Couldn't make head nor tail of it. Is it one of them code messages?"

"No," Daye said. "It so happens that I am an attorney in the employ of an insurance company. The gentleman who sent this telegram is my boss. He thinks I've had enough vacation. The wire means he has insured a gentleman by the name of Mr. Foxie for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and is now regretting it and would like me to do something about it."

"A hundred and fifty thousand," said Hob. "I'd feel right proud if I was worth that much—even dead."

"Ever hear of anyone around here by the name of Foxie?" Daye asked.

"Nope," said Nippy.

Hob shook his head. "Know a lotta people you could call foxy, but don't know nobody named that."

"Do you know of a place called Shadows?"

Nippy scratched his head. "I reckon that must be the old Ringer place. Some outsider bought that and put some fancy trimmin's on it awhile back."

"Where is it?"

"About thirty miles over west," Hob said.

Daye looked at him. "Can you take me over today?"

Hob shook his head. "Nope. Sorry, but I borrowed all the gas line out of my car to Leaper Roberts on account he was short of tubing for his still."

"How about you?" Daye asked Nippy.

"Possible," said Nippy. "Soon as I run up and get some corny whiskey for my wife's ague."

II.

It took Nippy until noon to go up and find Leaper Roberts and get the corn whiskey for Mirandy's ague, and then it turned out that the thirty miles Hob had calculated as the distance to the old Ringer place was as the crow flies and not by the incredibly twisted back trail that Nippy followed to get there. To complicate matters further, he had three punctures on the way, and since his old car carried nothing so conventional in the way of equipment as a spare tire, he and Daye had to patch the tube each time.

It was dusk, therefore, when the old car rocked around a particularly steep curve in the road and Nippy stopped it with a jar and a wheeze and a protesting groan of worn brake bands.

"There she sits," said Nippy, pointing to the

right and up. "Pretty as a piece of sugar cake, ain't it?"

The house was high above them on the hill, partially masked by the tall and blackly solemn pines. It was white and rambling, and in spite of the white paint that glistened in the blood-red rays of the setting sun, it looked incredibly old and menacing in some indefinable, grotesque way.

"Old Ringer built that nigh onto fifty years ago," Nippy observed. "Loony as a goose, he was. He was a miner, and they do tell that he killed his partner off and ate him one bad winter up in the Klondike way. Anyway, he never was right after he come back from there. He went and built him this place and married him a widow woman with three kids. And one night, sure enough, he chopped the widow woman and the three kids up with an ax and then went and drowned himself in the swamp back yonder."

"Aren't you going to drive up?" Daye asked impatiently.

"Nope," said Nippy. "Can't noways do it. Road's too steep for this here car. You'll have to hoof her."

Daye got out. He was tired and dirty and hot from his labor of mending tires, and he sighed resignedly as he contemplated the long uphill climb to the house.

"Want I should wait?" Nippy asked.

Daye shook his head. "No. Never mind. If I can't get a ride of some kind, I'll walk back. It would be quicker."

"Might, at that," Nippy admitted. "Don't go takin' no short cuts, though. Misty Swamp's on three sides of us here, and it ain't no place to be wanderin' around without knowin' where you're goin'."

"I'll get along," Daye said. "How much do I owe you?"

Nippy was surprised. "Me? Nothin'. It's a pleasure. I didn't have anything to do today, anyway, and I like to ride around. Does a person good, I say."

"Thanks a lot," said Daye. "So long."

Nippy coughed. "Ain't afraid of ha'nts, are you?"

Daye turned around. "Ha'nts? What are they?"

Nippy waved his hand. "Ghosts and hobgoblins and suchlike."

Daye grinned. "No. Why?"

"Well, they do say old Ringer is given to wanderin' around in the light of the moon now and again, all drippin' with mud and water, and wavin' his bloody ax in the air. Of course, I ain't sayin' I ever seen him, but then I don't want to, either."

"If I see him, I'll say hello for you," Dave said.

"You maybe won't get the chance—if you see him," said Nippy. "So long."

Daye went up the road. Behind him he could hear the rattle and groan of the old engine as Nippy turned the touring car around. The noise ascended to a coughing uproar as Nippy got the car straightened out and started away, and then Daye went around a curve and the noise faded behind him.

The dust was soft and spongy under his feet, and the deep-blue shadow of dusk lengthened slowly as he walked upward, bent forward a little to balance his weight against the slope. It was growing cooler, and the slight breeze felt fresh and clean against his face.

He stopped after a while to catch his breath, and as soon as he did, the silence of the woods around him seemed to grow and palpitate like a living force and the shadows became sinister, creeping things.

Daye shrugged his shoulders with a little grunt of contempt for his own imagination, and then as he turned his head to look around him, he saw an indistinct figure watching him from the brush to his left and farther up the hill.

He stared for a startled second, unbelieving, and the figure made no move or sound. It was uncannily still.

"Hello, there," said Daye.

The figure didn't answer. It was as rigid and black as the surrounding tree trunks.

"A stump," said Daye to himself in a murmur. "Just a stump. I'm getting jumpy."

He turned away, and in that same second, driven by some instinct stronger than that, he whirled back to stare again. The figure was no longer there. In that split second when his eyes had left it, it had disappeared.

It had not been a stump. Daye swallowed hard, fighting against the little chilly fingers that crawled along his back and remembering in spite of himself the wild story that Nippy had told him about the ghost with the wet, dripping clothes and the bloody ax swinging in the moonlight.

"Hell!" he said emphatically.

He turned away again determinedly and walked up the road that curved and twisted, following the contour of the land. He could feel the play of those cold fingers along his back and reaching up to touch his neck, but he plodded ahead steadily, mentally cursing his job and Anderson and the elusive Mr. Foxie somewhere hidden in the big house ahead.

He came out, at last, on the sweep of what had once been an immense, terraced lawn but was now a knee-high tangled scrub of weeds and brush. A path wandered aimlessly through it, and Daye followed it up to the wide front porch with its high, gracefully white pillars.

The house itself, in contrast to the lawn, was in excellent repair and had just been put in such shape. The paint was as new as it had looked at a distance, and the roof had been replaced. Evidently Mr. Foxie had not yet got around to fixing up the grounds.

Daye went up the front steps. He could see no lights through the windows along the porch, and there was no sign of any person's presence. There

was a new brass knocker on the door, and Daye banged it emphatically. The metallic echoes rolled out and lost themselves in the dark silence.

Daye waited, and he was reaching for the knocker again, when the door swung back quietly and easily on newly oiled hinges.

"Good evening," said Daye. "I wanted . . . I wanted—"

He had been expecting almost anything but what he was now actually looking at.

It was a girl, and a very pretty girl. She was slim and small and straight, and there was a quietly efficient dignity in the way she stood there looking out at him. Her hair was dark, cut in a long, smooth bob, glinting a little. She wore a dress which had the faint appearance of a uniform. It was a deep blue with white starched cuffs and collar.

"Yes?" she said quietly. "What was it you wanted?"

Daye swallowed and grinned foolishly. "Well, I wanted to see Mr. Foxie."

Her brown eyes were very large and dark, watching him steadily. "Why do you want to see him?"

Daye said: "I'm an attorney. James D. Daye is the name. I'm employed by the Greater Mutual Co. in their legal department, and they hold a policy on Mr. Foxie's life. I merely wanted to see him . . . well, in regard to the policy."

The girl didn't move out of the doorway. "Have you any proof of your identity?"

"Certainly," said Daye, taking some papers out of his coat pocket. "Here's my business card. Here's my authorization as an agent of the company. Here's a bill for dues from the bar association. Here's my driver's license."

The girl examined the papers carefully, standing a trifle to one side so the dim light from inside the hall came over her slim shoulder. She nodded gravely at last.

"These seem to be authentic. My name is Ruth Sales, Mr. Daye. I'm Mrs. Hartway's secretary. I'm sorry to have to question you as I did, but you understand that we must be very careful just now."

"Oh, yes," Daye said vaguely, not understanding at all. "You said you were—Mrs. Hartway's secretary?"

"Yes." She offered no further explanation. "You may see Mr. Foxie if you wish. He's down at the stables."

"Stables?" Daye repeated.

"Yes. He's eating his supper now."

"Eating . . . supper," Daye echoed blankly. "In the stables?"

"Yes."

"Oh," said Daye, still groping mentally. "Does he . . . usually eat in the stables?"

"Why, of course. Where else would he eat?"

"I . . . wouldn't know," said Daye. He was beginning to think Anderson's telegram hadn't exaggerated when he said that there were rumors of dirty work. Something was clearly out of order around this place.

"I'll take you there," Ruth Sales said. She came out of the doorway. "It's around this way."

Daye followed her down the steps and along a path that ran close to the house, paralleling one side.

"We'll have to hurry," Ruth Sales said. "It is almost time for the moon to rise."

"Is it?" Daye asked. "Would that make any difference?"

"Of course. It's a full moon, and Mrs. Hartway has been waiting for it quite awhile."

"Why?" Daye inquired.

"For the hexing."

Daye stopped short and cleared his throat. "I think perhaps my hearing is getting bad. Did you say . . . hexing?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you know?"

"I didn't, and I don't," said Daye. "Just what is . . . hexing?"

"Witchcraft. Mrs. Hartway brought Mr. Foxie up here to put a spell on him."

"A spell," said Daye, completely flabbergasted. "Good heavens, I don't think I got here any too soon. Let's hurry."

They came around the side of the house, and there was another and lower building ahead of them. It was painted the same new, brilliant white as the house, and there was dim light showing through the wide, sliding doors and two of the square-cut, high windows.

As they approached, someone came out of the doors and stood waiting where the light cut across him at a slant and showed only widely spraddled, thick legs in shiny leather puttees.

Ruth Sales evidently recognized the man, because she called to him:

"Pick! It's all right."

The man's voice said: "Who's with you?"

"He's a lawyer from the insurance company. His name is Daye."

"A lawyer," said the man. "That's all we need to make things one-hundred-percent lousy."

They were closer to him now, and Daye could see that he was short and enormously wide without giving the impression of being fat. He wore corduroy riding breeches and a tan shirt, and he had a red-veined, hard face and protruding eyes that glistened like wet stone. A big chew of tobacco bulged out his left cheek, and he spat now into the dust, staring sideways at Daye.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see Mr. Foxie."

Ruth Sales said softly: "This is Pick Crail, Mr. Daye. He's Mr. Foxie's trainer."

Pick Crail nodded and spat tobacco juice again. "That's what they call me, but it don't mean much to the loonies around this joint. What do you want to see Mr. Foxie for?"

"In regard to his policy with my company," Daye explained wearily.

"O. K.," Crail said. "Wait'll I see if he's through eatin'. He don't like to be disturbed when he is. Upsets his stomach and gets him nervous."

He went back into the stable and returned almost instantly.

"O. K. Come on in. Be quiet. Don't make him nervous."

Ruth Sales and Daye went in through the big door. The stables seemed to stretch endlessly away from them, whitewashed rafters casting ladderlike shadows up into the dim cavern of the roof.

"There," said Pick Crail, pointing toward the first box stall.

Daye stared blankly. He could see nothing in the stall but a horse.

"Well—where's Mr. Foxie?" he asked.

"Right there in front of your snoot," Crail said "In the stall."

Daye swallowed. "A horse?" he said weakly.

Crail turned to look at Ruth Sales. "What's the matter with this bird? Is he nuts?"

She shook her head, frowning in a puzzled way at Daye.

Daye caught his breath. "Do you mean to tell me that Mr. Foxie is just a horse?"

"Just a horse!" Crail snorted angrily. "*Just* a horse! What're you talkin' about? Mr. Foxie is the best race horse in the world, bar none!"

"Oh," said Daye faintly. "Well . . . well, you see my office telegraphed me to look up Mr. Foxie, and they didn't add any explanation. I thought, of course, Mr. Foxie was a person."

Ruth Sales laughed softly. "Then that's why you looked at me so queerly when I told you he always ate in the stable. I couldn't understand what was the matter with you."

"I can't yet," Crail said grumpily. "Don't you never read the newspapers? Mr. Foxie gets spread all over the headlines whenever he runs."

"Well," Daye said uncomfortably, "I don't usually pay much attention to horse-racing. I'm a dog-race fan, myself."

Crail's round face turned purple. "Dogs! You mean to tell me you'd rather see a pack of mangy hounds chase a tin rabbit than to see *horses* run?"

"Well—yes," Daye admitted, and added, "I don't like horses."

Crail shook his head slowly. "He don't like horses." He suddenly picked up steam. "Don't like horses! Why, you . . . you—"

"Pick!" Ruth Sales rebuked.

Crail subsided, snorting. "All right. I might have known it. Lawyers is all crooked or nuts. Well, like 'em or not, take a look at this baby. He's the sweetest thing you'll ever see, if you live to be a hundred and two."

"May I go closer?" Daye asked.

"Sure. Don't make any sudden passes at him, though. He's as nervous as a cat."

Daye walked slowly closer, and Mr. Foxie turned a blaze-starred head to look at him. Daye, not knowing anything about horses, thought he was the most gracefully lithe animal he had ever seen. He was dun-colored, and his coat gleamed with a burnished sheen that reflected the light in quick, flowing streaks when he moved restlessly. He snorted at Daye, neither friendly nor shy.

Daye extended his hand carefully, and Mr. Foxie nuzzled at it with eager lips and then shook his head and whickered very softly.

"He's begging," Ruth Sales murmured, standing at Daye's side. "He wants some sugar."

She extended her hand, too, and Mr. Foxie nuzzled it and then tossed his head protestingly.

"Pick," Ruth said, "can't I give him just a small piece?"

"Nope," said Crail. "He just ate. He's a pig. He just thinks he can work you, that's all, on account you're always makin' so much over him." He pointed his finger at Mr. Foxie accusingly. "You don't get no sugar, you hear? You know damned well you've had enough to eat."

Mr. Foxie snorted defiantly.

"And don't talk back," Crail ordered.

Mr. Foxie snorted again.

Crail shook his head. "He's gettin' sassy as hell. I dunno what I'm gonna do with him."

Daye said: "He's beautiful. But—there must be some mistake. My company wouldn't insure a horse for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Not *that* much."

"What're you talkin' about?" Crail demanded belligerently. "You know how much the horse won last year? He won fifty-seven thousand dollars! When you earn that much in a year, baby, you'll have some room to talk about him. And that ain't all. He's gonna win three times that much this year because he's gonna take the Rio Seco hundred thousand added!"

"Oh," said Daye, stunned. "I didn't realize that one horse could make that much money."

The stable had been growing gradually lighter, and now Ruth noticed it and said to Crail:

"The moon is coming up."

"Oh, hell!" said Crail, in disgust. "Now we got to put up with that damned hocus-pocus. I tell you I don't like this! It makes Mr. Foxie nervous to have that batty kid mumblin' over him, and, anyway, Mr. Foxie don't need any hex to win the Rio Seco. They got too much weight on him, but he'll run them other broomtails off their feet no matter if they put two hundred on him, and I don't see why the hell—"

There was a stir of footsteps outside the stable, and three people came in the wide door, silhouetted for a second against the brightness of the moonlight outside. A woman's voice, high-pitched and wheezing and excited, was saying:

"And you're sure now, Cornelius, that the conditions are just right and that Henny understands?"

"Yup," a man's voice answered lifelessly.

Ruth Sales stepped forward. "Mrs. Hartway, this is Mr. James A. Daye, an attorney representing the company that insured Mr. Foxie. Mr. Daye, this is Mrs. Hartway. She owns Mr. Foxie."

"How do you do, Mrs. Hartway," Daye said.

Mrs. Hartway was short and incredibly round. She had an appearance of soft, washy fatness, and she seemed to flow over the ground rather than walk. Her face was a red, perfectly round circle framed by a dramatic friz of gray hair. Now she put both pudgy hands up to her forehead tragically and said:

"Please! Oh, please! Not now! Not now! You mustn't interrupt! You mustn't intrude an alien thought presence. This moment is of the most vital importance!"

"Surely," Daye said in a wondering voice.

Mrs. Hartway gestured commandingly at her two companions. "Cornelius! Henny! Begin!"

"Henny's all set," said the tall man behind her. He was evidently Cornelius. He was a long, gaunt, shambling man dressed in a shabby black suit. His mouth was a drooping, colorless line, and his immense beaked nose seemed to dominate the rest of his features and leave them small and sly behind it.

Henny was a boy, but it was impossible to tell his age, because he was obviously an idiot. He had whitish eyes with no sense of reason or understanding in them and a slackly dull face. His hair was white, too, hanging down over the narrow ribbon of his forehead. He made aimless, unintelligible mouthing sounds, and little bubbles of saliva formed and burst on his lips.

"Got to have the lights out," said Cornelius. "Henny can't put no hex with the lights."

Mrs. Hartway swept her arm commandingly at Crail. "Pick! Put out the lights!"

Crail went grumbling toward the switch near the door.

"What *is* this?" Daye whispered to Ruth.

She murmured softly: "Mrs. Hartway is going to put a spell on Mr. Foxie, so that he can win the Rio Seco."

"But these other two—"

"Henny is the one who can hex—they say. Cornelius is his brother. Mrs. Hartway brought them up here with Mr. Foxie, where the conditions are supposed to be just right, so Henny could put the spell on Mr. Foxie."

"Is she crazy?" Daye demanded.

Ruth moved her slim shoulders. "All horse players and gamblers are superstitious."

"But this," said Daye, "this is more than supersition. "This is . . . is—"

The lights went out, and then there was only the soft yellow brilliance of the moon creeping like molten gold through the open door and the smeared glass of the windowpanes.

Henny's voice muttered sounds in a wet sputter.

Cornelius said: "Henny's got to touch him. Can't put no hex unless you can feel."

There was the sound of someone sliding against wood, and Mr. Foxie snorted once in startled protest. His feet thudded, moving on the boards of his stall, and then he was quiet again.

Cornelius' lifeless voice said: "All right now. Henny. Go ahead, Henny. Put on the hex."

"Be sure," said Mrs. Hartway in a dramatic whisper. "Be sure it's right."

In the stall Henny began to mumble, a long, rising succession of unintelligible sounds that were like words and yet not like words, that had a queer swinging cadence and rhythm.

The stable was deadly still except for that wordless chant, and the tension seemed to rise with the sound of it, rise in the silence until it was almost unbearable.

Daye shivered in spite of himself. This was ridiculous and grotesque, but it was more than that. There was more than superstition here. There was something else. Something black and unnamable and ugly that was stirring all through the air, and Dave felt the perspiration clammily moist on his forehead.

Breath suddenly whistled through Mr. Foxie's nostrils. It was a sound full of deadly fear.

Crail yelled from near the door: "What the hell you doin' to that horse, you—"

Mr. Foxie whinnied in a blast of terror, and Daye felt Ruth Sales jerk away from his side and move toward the stall. He caught at her in the darkness and missed, and then Mr. Foxie's hoofs beat a rattling tattoo on the sides and back of his stall.

Henny's chant stopped, and he screamed once and then again, and the second scream was cut short with a dreadful abruptness.

"Mr. Foxie," Ruth was pleading softly. "Please, boy. Please. Quiet now."

Mr. Foxie snorted and reared in his stall, fighting against the halter that snubbed him.

"Lights!" Daye yelled. "Turn on those lights!"

Crail was still somewhere near the door, swearing in a bitterly eloquent tirade, and he found the switch now and turned the lights on. Their brilliance was like the slash of a stage curtain drawn away from some incredibly horrible scene.

Ruth was inside the box stall with Mr. Foxie, holding his head with her full weight suspended, swinging wildly back and forth as Mr. Foxie reared and fought blindly.

Crail came running. "Get him out! Don't let him hurt himself! Watch out!"

There was something horribly limp and battered, squashed down into a corner of the stall, and Mr. Foxie's vengefully terrified hoofs flicked at it again and again, smearing it, red and crumpled,

against the side of the stall.

"Henny!" Cornelius yelled. "Henny! He's killed—"

Daye was trying to get in the stall, conscious only of Ruth's white and agonized face.

"Keep away!" she begged breathlessly. "All of you! Get back! I can handle him!"

Mr. Foxie stopped plunging for a second, and Ruth was talking to him in a soothing murmur, pleading, cajoling.

"Let her!" Crail commanded. "Don't none of you get near him!"

Daye backed away several reluctant steps. Ruth had slipped the halter rope, and she was pushing against Mr. Foxie's head, throwing her whole weight against him. He began to back out of the open stall, step by reluctant step. As soon as he cleared it, he reared again and Ruth swung like a slim pendulum in the air. Daye started forward, but Crail caught him by his arm.

"Leave her alone!"

Mr. Foxie came back down on four feet, and then he was quiet, his big eyes gassy with fear, his nostrils expanded, trembling the whole length of his sleek body.

"Quiet, boy. Quiet, now." Ruth's voice was a low murmur.

Mr. Foxie whickered and shied away from the stall, but she still held on to his head, talking to him gently.

"Good girl!" said Crail. "Oh, good girl!" He approached cautiously and got hold of the halter rope. "I've got him. All right, Foxie boy. You're all right now. Nobody's gonna hurt you. See, it's just old Pick holdin' you. Come on."

He led Mr. Foxie back toward the rear of the stables. Mr. Foxie was still fighting the lead rope, skittering and shying, but he went along with Crail.

Ruth swayed a little, her face a nauseated white mask. Daye caught her and held her.

"Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, no. Not Mr. Foxie. He wouldn't hurt me. He was just scared. Did you see . . . see in the stall—"

"Yes," said Daye.

"Henny, he's dead," said Cornelius from inside the stall. "Henny, he's all mashed up to bits, looks like."

"Oh!" Mrs. Hartway wailed. "Oh, oh! It was all wrong! What happened? Why did he do that?"

"Looks like that hex will turn backward now," Cornelius said. "Sure looks like it. That hex will turn itself right around and come back at Mr. Foxie the wrong way."

"Oh, oh!" Mrs. Hartway wailed.

Crail came back to the group.

"That damned young idjit!" he snarled barefully. "It's good enough for him! He stuck Mr. Foxie with a knife, that's what he done! Didn't hurt him none, but that wasn't his fault!"

"Henny didn't have no knife," Cornelius said. "I don't allow for Henny to carry no knives."

"Well, he cut him with something," Crail said. "Take a look, if you don't believe me. Mr. Foxie's got a cut right along his flank."

"Henny wouldn't cut him," Cornelius said stubbornly. "Ain't no place for cuttin' in a hex. Ain't no reason for him to do that. Somebody else done it." He turned his head slowly, staring from one to the other of them. His eyes were pinched, glittering slits, and his face was twisted into a baleful mask. "Someone done that to Mr. Foxie so he'd stomp Henny and stop the hexin'. Somebody here done that. Henny, he was my brother. Somebody's gonna be paid back for him. Somebody is. You wait."

Daye protested: "Why, no one would do that."

"Somebody did," said Cornelius. "Maybe you did."

"You're crazy!" said Daye. "Why should I wish any harm to that poor little idiot? I'd never even seen him before."

"Somebody done it," Cornelius said. "Somebody's gonna pay for it."

"I'm sorry," Daye told him, "and I understand how you feel about it, but, tragic as it is, I'm afraid it was Henny's own fault. If anyone cut Mr. Foxie, it was he. He was the only one in the stall."

"Could easy reach over the side," Cornelius maintained stubbornly. "And where's what he cut with, if Henny did it? Don't see nothin' to cut with in that stall, do you?"

Daye looked in the stall, wincing involuntarily at the crumpled, battered mass that had been Henny. The board floor was clean, except for the blood, and there was no sign of any cutting instrument.

"There's nothing here," he admitted. "But I can't understand why anyone would—"

Somewhere breaking glass made a faint, tinkling crash.

"What was that?" Ruth asked in a puzzled voice.

"Sounded like somebody bust a window up at the house," Crail said, starting for the stable door.

"Is there anyone up there?" Daye inquired of Ruth.

She shook her head. "There's no one supposed to be."

Mrs. Hartway clutched at her heart with both pudgy hands. "My jewels! My furs! Someone is stealing—"

"Fire!" Crail suddenly yelled from outside the stable. "The house is on fire!"

The others made a concerted rush for the door. Outside the night had a queer, ghostlike, distorted brilliance, and the moon hung low and yellow-red on the horizon. The white house was lonely and gaunt above them. There were no lights in it and everything around it was dark.

"I don't see anything—" Daye began.

"There!" Crail shouted, pointing.

Flame licked up behind one of the windows on the first floor, flattening itself against the pane like a hungrily spreading red hand, and was gone again instantly. Smoke odor drifted thin and bitter in the air.

"My jewels!" Mrs. Hartway screamed.

"It's the hex," Cornelius stated confidently. "It's Henny's hex comin' backward. I told you."

Mrs. Hartway started to run up the slope. She ran at an awkward waddle, fighting the air wildly with her short, pudgy arms, but she went fast in spite of that. Cornelius followed at his shambling trot, muttering direly to himself, and Daye ran beside Ruth.

Behind them, Crail said: "I gotta stay here. Mr. Foxie is scared to death of fires. If he smells that smoke, he'll start raisin' hell and hurt himself—"

His voice faded as he went back into the stables.

As they came closer to the house, the flames licked up sinisterly red behind the windowpane again, and Mrs. Hartway screamed in a strangled voice, as though the very sight of them hurt her.

Daye said breathlessly: "Have you anything to fight a fire with? This is an old house. If it gets much more of a start—"

Ruth was small and slim and lithe, running effortlessly at his side. "There's an extinguisher in the hall, and there's a garden hose in that shed at the side."

"I'll get the hose," Daye said. "The extinguisher might not be enough."

He cut away from them at a slant, heading for the small shed that was half hidden in the shadow beside the house. As he came around on the side, he saw shadowy movement ahead of him, and he stopped short, trying to make it out.

Something moved at the farther corner of the house, a blob queerly suspended in the air, dark against the white paint.

"What—" Daye said, and then he knew what it was. It was a man's head, peering cautiously at him around the corner. As he identified it, it moved and was gone instantly.

"Here! Stop!" Daye shouted.

Forgetting the hose for a second, he ran headlong to the corner of the house, whirled around it. The man was down the slope ahead of him, running hard, fighting his way through the thigh-high tangle of brush and weeds.

"Stop!" Daye shouted again, starting after him.

The man tripped in the brush and fell flat on his face in a threshing tangle, but before Daye could reach him, he was up again, on one knee, and there was the bright, quick glitter of a knife in his hand. He was a small, thin, wiry man with a white, desperately twisted face, and he held the knife expertly, like a knife fighter does, with the blade up.

"No, you don't!" Daye panted, and dived headlong at him.

He turned a little in the air and caught the flick of the knife driving at him and slipping just over his shoulder. Then he struck the little man with the whole weight of his body, and they went down and over into the brush. Daye rolled and rolled again, purposely, to keep the little man from striking with the knife, and then he got the thin, bony wrist of the knife hand in his grasp and twisted.

The little man yelled. The knife, jerked free of his hand, flipped up and over in a glittering arc. Daye changed his grip to the man's throat and jerked him up to his feet.

"All right. Now, who are you?"

The man's lips twisted wordlessly, and his white face was crazily desperate with fear. Daye shook him.

"Answer me. Who are you?"

There had been no faintest sound behind Daye, not even the crackle of brush to warn him, but he suddenly knew that there was someone very close, and he tried to turn around, still keeping his grasp on the little man's throat. He wasn't quite turned when the blow struck his head just above the temple. It was as though the whole night had suddenly turned over, cascading him whirling down into thick blackness. He felt himself falling endlessly, and then he felt nothing more.

III.

Daye heard a faint, faraway voice saying plaintively: "Hey, mister. Wake up. Come on."

Daye stirred a little, feeling the brush move under him, and then his head seemed to swell enormously, with the blood pounding at his bruised temple with strokes that were like the blows of a thousand miniature hammers. He groaned involuntarily.

"Here," said the plaintive voice.

Something pressed against Daye's lips, and he swallowed automatically. The liquor burned like fire all the way down his throat, and he choked and coughed and then choked again.

"Sure is strong," said the plaintive voice. "Old Leaper Roberts must have put some blasting powder in this run by mistake."

It was Nippy Cooper. He was squatting comfortably on his heels beside Daye, with his old straw hat tipped back off his forehead.

Daye sat up and touched his temple, wincing as he felt the long swelling welt there.

"How'd you get here?" he demanded.

"I was thinkin'," said Nippy comfortably. "I was thinkin' that maybe Hob Nule would get kinda mad at me if I went and took his roomer and boarder away and didn't bring him back again. Hob Nule was tellin' me a week or so back that if he could get you to stay on awhile, he'd make enough off

you to loaf for two months, and so I thought maybe I better come and fetch you back."

"Did you hit me?" Daye asked suspiciously.

"Me?" said Nippy. "Heck, no. What I want to go and hit you for?"

"Somebody wanted to," Daye stated. "Did you see who it was?"

"Nope. I was cruisin' around the yard here, just a-lookin' to see what I could see, and I spotted you all stretched out like the corpse at a wake. Sure scared me. I figured Hob Nule had lost his boarder and roomer for sure. I figured old Ringer had up and whanged you with his ax."

"It wasn't any ghost that hit me," Daye said.

"Never can tell," said Nippy. "Some ghosts is mighty powerful and mighty mean. What's all the hootin' and hurrahin' up to the house?"

"House!" Daye exclaimed, suddenly remembering the fire. He scrambled shakily to his feet, staring.

The big white house was still there. It didn't show any visible signs of damage, and Daye couldn't see anyone around it.

"There was a fire—" he said, puzzled.

He saw a light, then, moving in one of the windows. It was not the light of flames, though. It was steady and white and brilliant—a lamp of some kind.

"People doin' a lot of runnin' and hollerin', while I was settin' here tryin' to wake you up," Nippy informed him, "but I don't see nothin' doin' now."

"Come on," Daye said.

He crashed his way through the brush up the slope to the front porch. The big front door was ajar, and Daye went slowly and cautiously into the dimness of the big hall. Ahead he could see the faint reflection of a light coming through an open door, and now the sharply pungent odor of smoke and wet ashes was plainly discernible.

"Smells likes somebody's been playin' Injun," Nippy observed, peering around him curiously.

Daye stopped in the lighted doorway and stared at the room inside in incredulous amazement. The fire must have been brief, but tremendously hot. It had completely gutted the room.

Once it had been a library, lined with shelves of books. A couple of the shelves had collapsed now, and the books they had contained were lying in a slow-smoldering, sodden pile in the middle of the floor. The drapes were raggedly black, futuristic fringes hanging to the iron curtain rods. The floor, rug and all, was covered two inches deep with some kind of foamy extinguisher fluid that looked like dirty soapsuds. A chair had its leather cushion and arms burned out, and a big desk lay on its side in the corner.

"Hell to breakfast," Nippy murmured, awed.

Mrs. Hartway squatted in the middle of the floor like some crazily grotesque Chinese idol. Flames had burned off one of her sleeves, and the side of her face was a black smear of soot. Her frizzy hair stood up in bushy abandon. She was holding a double handful of jewelry in her lap, examining it piece by piece with studied concentration.

"Mrs. Hartway," Daye said.

"Go away," she ordered shortly. "No. Don't go away. Stay there. You're going to take him."

"Take who?" Daye asked blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Foxie."

"Take him where?" Daye demanded.

"I don't care. Any place. Away."

"But why?" Daye asked, still puzzled.

"Because he's yours."

"Mine?" Daye repeated vaguely.

"Yes. I give him to you. Now."

"But you can't— I can't—"

Mrs. Hartway put her jewels down and tangled both pudgy hands in her frizzed hair. She put her head back and screamed. She screamed again in

pure, jittering, speechless rage.

"Wow!" Nippy commented. "She's worse than Mirandy. I swear she is. You better do what she says, I'm telling you. I'm a man that knows about these things."

Mrs. Hartway waved her arms. "Look! Just look! This beautiful, beautiful room! Ruined! It'll cost me thousands . . . thousands . . . all because of that horse! It's the hex, do you hear? He's bad luck, and he'll never be good luck for me again as long as I live! You take him, you hear? You're going to take him! Don't you dare refuse!"

"But he's too valuable—" Daye protested.

Mrs. Hartway heaved herself up to her feet, and her jewels fell in a glittering cascade on the soapy carpet.

"You take him!"

"Well, all right," Daye said, "but I think you should think about this thing before—"

Mrs. Hartway was paying no attention. She was leaning over the battered desk now, tugging at one of the drawers. It finally came open a few inches, and she edged her pudgy hand inside it. She brought out a legal-looking paper that had a yellowish smear of water across one corner. Holding the paper, she got down on her hands and knees and scrabbled around in the soapy mixture on the floor until she uncovered a fountain pen from a desk set. With the pen, she scribbled an indorsement on the paper.

"There! Take it! Take that horse away from here! I never want to see him again! Get out!"

Nippy tugged urgently at Daye's sleeve. "You better come. She's gettin' worse. I can always tell just before they start throwin' things."

"Wait," Daye ordered. "Mrs. Hartway, where are the others? Where is Ruth? Where are Crail and Cornelius?"

"I don't know, and I don't care! I told them to get out, and they did! Now *you* get out!"

Daye shrugged, and he and Nippy went back down the hall. They could hear Mrs. Hartway moaning as she began to pick up her scattered jewels again, checking each one off audibly as she found it.

"Batty," Nippy said. "I never see one quite as batty as that. What did she give you, anyway? Who's this feller, Mr. Foxie? Is he her husband—poor guy?"

"No, he's a horse."

"A horse!" Nippy exclaimed. "What kind of a business is that? You don't call a horse 'Mister'! It ain't right."

"This is a very special horse."

"If she owns him, he sure must be," Nippy observed. "Where is he at?"

"Probably down at the stables. We'll go and see."

They went down the steps of the front porch and around the narrow path that circled the house. There was still a light in the stables, and as Daye came closer, he called:

"Crail! Ruth! Cornelius!"

His voice sounded loud and heavy in the silence, but there was no answer, no movement inside the stables.

"Nobody home," said Nippy. He stepped inside the wide doors and peered interestedly around. "And I don't see no— Oh!"

"What is it?" Daye asked.

Nippy pointed mutely.

Back along the aisle that ran behind the stalls, the light from the bulb in the rafters reached only dimly. Something on the floor reflected it in a polished streak, and as Daye moved closer, he saw that the object was a puttee. The puttee was still clasped around Crail's leg, and the leg itself was bent back at an awkward angle, soddenly motionless.

The rest of Crail's big body was inside one of the stalls, lying crumpled loosely there, with his head canted awkwardly over against his shoulder. Daye knelt down beside him.

"Dead?" Nippy asked, peering cautiously.

"No," said Daye. He felt Crail's thick wrist. There was a faint, indistinct flutter of a pulse, and breath made a laborious rattling sound in Crail's throat. "He's been hit on the head, and hit hard. I'm afraid he's badly hurt. Perhaps a fracture. We'll have to get him to a doctor at once. Help me, and we'll carry him up to the house. We can call from there."

"Ain't a mite of use," said Nippy. "Only doctor in these parts is old Doc Taylor. He don't have no automobile. Don't believe in such newfangled contraptions. Won't even ride in one. It'd take him three-four hours to get here in his buggy."

"Crail has got to have care," Daye said. "There's no way for us to tell how badly he's hurt."

"I'll take him to Doc Taylor in my car," Nippy said.

"Fine," Daye said. "Let's carry him."

"Naw," said Nippy. "Let me. Don't need no help."

He proved that in the next second by leaning over and lifting Crail up gently and expertly and holding him cradled in his arms. Crail must have outweighed him by thirty pounds, but Nippy held him without any appreciable signs of strain.

"Can you carry him clear to the car?" Daye asked.

"Shucks, yes," Nippy said. "I'll be goin'. You better look for them other people and that horse. I don't see no horse in this place."

Daye turned to stare at the stall in which Crail had placed Mr. Foxie. It was, as Nippy had said, empty. Mr. Foxie had disappeared.

"Maybe them other two stole him," Nippy suggested.

"No!" Daye denied emphatically. "Of course not. He just wandered away."

"Somebody helped him wander," said Nippy. "It

wasn't no horse that cracked this guy on the head. Well, I'll get goin'. You better be careful for yourself."

"I will," Daye said absently.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't you go havin' no run-ins with old Ringer's ghost."

Nippy went up the slope toward the big white house, and Daye began to examine the stable carefully. There were scuffed marks on the boards near where Crail had fallen, as though he and his unknown opponent had engaged in a short but vicious struggle before he had been knocked out. Daye wondered if Crail's attacker had been the little white-faced man with the knife. He doubted that. Crail was big and tough and looked well able to take care of himself. He must have been attacked by more than one man, as Daye had been.

Daye looked into the first stall and found Henny's grotesquely crumpled little body still there. The blood was coagulating thickly on the dusty boards, and Daye swallowed hard, fighting back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him.

He wondered suddenly if Mrs. Hartway had notified the authorities of Henny's death and decided that she probably hadn't done so. He turned around, meaning to go up to the house, and then stopped short, drawing in his breath.

A man was standing in the door of the stable, lounging lazily against the whitewashed jamb, watching Daye with an air of faint, speculative interest.

"Take it easy," he drawled. He moved his left arm, pushing back the front of his blue, double-breasted coat far enough to show a shoulder holster and the dull gleam of a big automatic in it.

Daye's throat felt tight and thick. "Who are you?" he asked.

"George," said the other man. "That's as good a name as any for the moment. You've got kind of a tough noggin on you, haven't you? I thought I'd put you out of the running for a while."

"You're the one who hit me?"

"Yeah. And now let me play awhile. Just who the hell are you and what are you doing around here?"

"My name is James Daye. I'm attorney for the company that has insured Mr. Foxie. I came to see about the policy. They were having some kind of a séance here, and Mr. Foxie—"

"Yeah, I know. I was listenin' from outside."

"And then there was a fire up at the house," Daye said, "and I saw another man—"

"Yeah, I told him to start the fire. You caught him while he was sneakin' out, the dummy. So I had to go help him get away from you, and while I was away, somebody walked out with Mr. Foxie and batted Pick Crail on the head."

"You didn't hit Crail?"

"Nope. He was lyin' just like you saw him when I first got here after I shook you loose from Pete. Now listen, mister. I'm tired of talking. Where's the horse?"

Daye watched him speculatively. "You mean Mr. Foxie? Why do you want him?"

The man called George moved impatiently against the door jamb, and the light flowed across his face. He had high cheekbones and a thin, long nose and the carefully dull, blank, impersonal eyes of a gambler. He had a restrained air of tensity that he successfully concealed except for the occasional twitch of a tiny muscle at the corner of his mouth.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you. Mr. Foxie is the fastest thing on legs, and he's the favorite to beat Brass Hat for the Rio Seco next month. Back awhile, when Mrs. Hartway bought him, I started getting some ideas. She's a crackpot. I knew that. She had some goofy idea of putting spells on Mr. Foxie so he couldn't lose. Spells work sometimes, but they don't work in a horse race. The only way to win a race is to run faster than the rest. No horse can do that unless you train it—spells or no spells. I figured she wouldn't train Mr. Foxie, and I figured he'd get beat. You followin' me?"

"Yes," Daye admitted.

"All right. So I spread around the country a hundred grand on Brass Hat against Mr. Foxie and the no-account field, in the Rio Seco."

"One hundred thousand dollars?" Daye repeated unbelievingly. "Can anybody bet that much on a horse race?"

"Yeah. It's a lot of dough. Especially when you ain't got it. I haven't. No one bookie got more than five G's. I'm good for that much with any of 'em. So I'm on the cuff with twenty-two different guys; and that means on the spot if I lose and can't pay."

Daye frowned at him. "You mean—"

"I mean I laid that much in markers—in I O U's. Now I hear that Mrs. Hartway ain't quite as cracked as I figured. She kept on Pick Crail for a trainer, and he's been workin' Mr. Foxie just like he should be worked, and he's got him in tiptop shape. If he goes in the race in that shape, he'll win."

"So?" Daye asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah. So. But he ain't going to. Pete, the boy you wrestled with, was a jockey once. He can fix Mr. Foxie so he'll be able to race, but he won't win."

"Why, you can't—"

"I can," George said levelly. "I'm not playing for nickels. If Mr. Foxie comes through, and I don't pay off, they'll pay me off—in the neck. If Mr. Foxie runs a poor race, Brass Hat wins. The other entries are just dogs. Then *I* win!"

The thin, white-faced little man slid around the corner of the barn, goggled at Daye fearfully for a second, and then whispered to George.

"He's gone, boss. I tagged him clear to the car and waited until he started off."

George nodded. "Good. Once more now, mister, where's Mr. Foxie?"

Daye shrugged. "I don't know. I don't have any idea."

"Where's the girl and the hillbilly?"

Daye moved his hands helplessly. "I don't know."

George said flatly: "I got an idea that if we find them, we'll find Mr. Foxie. So we're lookin'—right now. And you're comin' along with us, mister."

Pete's white, thin face twitched suddenly. "Hey, wait now. This is gettin' too damned steep for me. I don't mind fixin' a horse and maybe settin' phony fires, but there's a dead guy in that stall—"

"There'll be another one in there if you don't close that trap of yours," George said in his flat, impersonal voice.

Pete swallowed audibly. "Listen. I'm scared, see? There's a ghost around here. You heard 'em tell us about it. It's a guy that chopped his wife and kids up and comes back when the moon's full with his bloody ax, lookin' for somebody else to chop. Listen. I don't want to tangle with no ghosts."

George had the automatic in his hand. "How'd you like to tangle with this?"

Pete's mouth opened and closed silently.

"Get going," said George. He moved the automatic, and the moonlight glinted along its thick barrel. "You got a flashlight. Start lookin' for tracks outside the door. You, mister, stay right behind him. I'll be watchin' you."

Pete fumbled in his coat pocket, and a long flashlight glittered and shook in his hand. Its beam made a white circle on the ground.

"There's his tracks," said George. "Somebody led him right around the barn close to the wall. He was goin' quiet. I know that horse. He wouldn't go quiet with anybody he didn't know damned well. It was that girl."

"She wouldn't have any reason—" Daye protested.

George thrust the automatic hard into his back. "Shut up."

Pete whimpered: "Look, boss. Them tracks go off at a slant down the hill."

"Follow 'em."

Pete swung around to peer at him. "Boss, that's where that old guy went and drowned himself. That's the swamp where he's layin' with his ax and waitin'—"

George stepped back away from Daye and swung the big automatic in a vicious arc. The barrel clipped Pete just over the cheekbone and knocked him headlong into the brush down the slope. His flashlight made crazy, quivering signals in the air as he rolled over and over.

"Get up," George said levelly. "You ain't hurt—not near as bad as you're gonna be if you don't quit your monkey business. Get up and follow that horse."

Pete dragged himself to his feet. He was crying in choked gasps, and one side of his white face was disfigured with a long, spreading smear of blood. He staggered a little, and the beam of his flashlight quested around the ground until it picked up the deep-cut marks Mr. Foxie's hoofs had left. Pete followed them at a stumbling half trot.

"Keep up with him," George warned, poking Daye in the back with the automatic again.

Daye walked fast after Pete. The brush grabbed at his legs with eagerly warning fingers, and somewhere ahead a night bird called in a low, sinister chuckle. The ground cut sharply down, growing moist and soggy under Daye's feet.

"Here's a path," Pete gasped.

The path was a black slit in the lush greenness of the brush on either side of it. Mud slipped treacherously under Daye's feet, and he remembered the warning Nippy had given him about wandering around in the swamp without knowing where he was going.

"This place is dangerous," he said over his shoulder. "It's easy to get lost—"

"Where that horse can go, we can," said George. "You following those tracks yet, Pete?"

"Sure," said Pete quickly. "Sure, boss."

The path turned and twisted darkly, and the brush growth met over their heads now, cutting out the light of the moon and leaving them in blackness so thick it could be felt like the dampness of fog on their faces—cold and moist and triumphant.

Pete whispered thinly: "There's water over here to the left. Water—"

"You keep going," George ordered.

The flashlight wavered ahead, painting the strangling green of the brush in quick, futuristic sweeps. Daye had lost all sense of direction in the blackness. There was no means to tell which way they were going, except that the ground still sloped a little under his feet, and he knew they were heading toward the center of the swamp.

"Boss," said Pete, "the path—is gettin' narrower."

"The tracks still on it?"

"Y-yes."

"Then keep going."

They went on in single file. Daye's feet were sinking constantly deeper in soft mud that seemed to quake when he stepped on it, quivering gently, with a suggestion of soft, unfathomable depths under it that made the perspiration come out on his forehead.

Pete stopped so suddenly Daye ran into him and stumbled.

George snarled: "What the hell are you two—"

"Boss," Pete gasped, "boss, there's somebody right near us. I heard him."

"Damn you," said George. "I'm getting tired—"

Pete's flashlight swung up, and he screamed. There was a weird, elongated figure in front of him on the path. The figure was black and wet, and water oozed out of the soggy folds of its clothes. Its face was a black blob, shiny with mud, and it

seemed to stretch higher. There was something over its head that glinted, swishing down.

Daye hurled himself desperately sideways. Vines caught and held his ankles. He plunged and plunged again, trying to get free, and then he fell headlong, and water splashed under him.

Something back on the path made a sickening thud. In the same instant, George yelled and his automatic cut loose in a racketing thunder of sound. Feet pounded along the path, running. Daye lay flat with the water seeping coldly around him.

He held himself there, feeling the mud quiver and ooze under his spread body, holding his breath, trying to listen. He stayed there for what seemed like centuries, and then something soft and slimy slid quietly across his hand.

Daye choked a yell in his throat and heaved back instinctively. The brush fought and clutched at him with a million tearing fingers, and then he fell free into the path again. He knelt in the darkness, panting, trying to regain control of himself. The only sound around him was the drumbeat of his own heart.

At last he stood up unsteadily. He could touch the sides of the path with his outstretched arms, and he began to edge his way forward along it. He had taken three steps when he stumbled into something soft and limp.

He knelt down again, feeling it. It was Pete. Daye could tell by the thin wiriness of him. He was lying sprawled silently across the path. Daye shook him. There was no life in Pete at all. His head wiggled on his shoulders with a queer, horrible laxness, and when Daye touched it, he felt something thick and warm that was not mud or water.

Daye shuddered, wiping his fingers on his damp clothes. He got up again, stepping carefully over Pete's body. That other black figure had been just two paces farther forward, and it might be still there, waiting in the blackness, with the ax held up high over the smeared blob of its face. Daye's legs were stiff and lifeless under him, but he went forward, groping ahead, because he had to go forward, because Ruth Sales was somewhere on farther, alone with Mr. Foxie.

The figure was not there. Daye's groping hands found nothing, and he went on along the path, keeping on it by sheer blind instinct and the feel of the brush at either side. He went on endlessly, pausing whenever the path turned and feeling out its new direction. He lost all track of time and distance, and when he caught a glimpse of orange light flickering ahead of him, he thought for a second his eyes were tricking him.

He stood still, watching the distant, indistinct flicker for long moments, and then he went cautiously toward it. The ground rose now, suddenly and surprisingly, under his feet, and grew drier and more solid.

Daye could hear the quick, cheerful crackle of flames. He crept the last few feet on hands and knees and then very quietly parted the thick screen of brush with his hands.

Mr. Foxie heaved back and snorted almost in his face. Ruth Sales was standing on the other side of the small fire. Her dress had been torn and smeared with mud, and she held a stick determinedly in her hand, staring across the small fire.

"Oh," she said, gasping in sudden, weakened relief. "You! I . . . I thought—"

Daye stood up, and Mr. Foxie snorted again. He stamped his quick feet and whickered protestingly.

"Quiet, Foxie," Ruth said. "Quiet, boy."

Daye said: "I've . . . been looking for you."

Her face was white and drawn. "I thought you had . . . gone. You didn't come back."

"I found the man who started the fire. I caught him, but he had a friend, and the two of them were too much for me. When I came around, the fire was out and you were gone."

"I couldn't find you. I . . . I looked. And then I went down to the stables. Pick was lying there . . . dead." She sobbed in a choked gasp. "There was someone . . . something . . . trying to get in Mr. Foxie's stall. I screamed, and . . . and it ran. Through the side door. I thought someone must be trying to hurt Mr. Foxie, and I took him out of the stable. I was following this path. I thought I could circle around and find the road to town, but I got lost."

"No wonder," Daye said gently. "I did, too. I am now. But we'll get out in the morning. Pick wasn't dead. He was hurt badly—how badly I don't know—and I sent him into town to the doctor with a friend of mine."

Ruth sat down, collapsing on a moss-covered log that she had dragged close to the fire. "I . . . I'm so glad. He fought to keep whoever it was from Mr. Foxie, I know. I thought . . . thought he—And I thought you had run away."

Daye grinned, feeling the dried mud stretch and crack on his face. "I would have, only I didn't know which way to run. Every place I went, I got into worse trouble." He stopped short, remembering that trouble, and then said: "Have you a gun?"

Her eyes were suddenly terrified again, watching him. "No. What is it? What—"

"Just me," said George. "Just little old me."

He had circled around the clearing and come in from the opposite direction. His clothing was smeared with mud, and there was a long rip down the side of his coat, but he still held the heavy automatic. He raised the gun negligently now, coming slowly forward.

"I couldn't see to follow you," he said to Daye, "but you made plenty of noise. Stand still, both of you."

"What do you want here?" Daye demanded.

George grinned thinly. "I ain't got Pete any longer, so we can't go through with the deal the

way I figured. I don't know enough about it to fix Mr. Foxie so he can run and still not run good enough to win. But I can fix him so he can't run at all."

"No!" Ruth gasped. "You're not going to hurt Mr. Foxie!"

"You fool," said Daye. "It won't do you any good. In this case the race will not be held, or bets will be called off if Mr. Foxie is scratched. There is only one other horse worthy of the name entered."

"Sure," said George. "I won't win anything, like I figured to do, but I won't lose the hundred grand I ain't got, either."

"If you hurt this horse," Daye said evenly, "you'll be liable."

George's mouth twitched. "Yeah? For what? Killin' a horse ain't a serious crime. You could sue me, mister, and listen to me laugh."

He pointed the automatic at Mr. Foxie, and Mr. Foxie, sensing the peril in the movement, stamped nervously and jerked at his lead rope that Ruth had tied to the brush.

Ruth started forward. "No! You can't! Not—"

"Get back!" George ordered, and his voice had a thinly ugly undertone. "Get back! I'm telling you!"

Daye caught Ruth and thrust her aside. George was still ten feet away, and there was no chance for Daye to get close enough to him to seize the automatic. Instinctively Daye knew that George was an expert with the gun, that he was cold-blooded enough to shoot. That he would shoot.

Daye moved between Mr. Foxie and George. He stood there stubbornly facing the round black muzzle of the automatic, feeling his throat get thick.

"All right," said George. "You're asking for it."

His finger moved a little on the trigger. Mr. Foxie whinnied and jerked his head in alarm, and then there was a sudden crackle of brush. Something flashed across the fire in a weird, bright-whirling arc.

George saw it coming and tried to duck, but the whirling object hit him with the same sickening thud Daye had heard back on the path. George crumped at the knees, bending forward in a ridiculous, drunken bow. He hit the ground limply and lay there very still while blood crept out from under his hidden face and stained the ground in a growing, sluggish blot.

The brush crackled again, and a dark, thinly gaunt figure pushed through into the firelight. Daye whirled to face it, realizing the figure was the same blackly mysterious one Pete's flashlight had revealed waiting on the path.

The figure raised one hand and wiped at the mud on its face, and it was Cornelius.

"They done it," said Cornelius. "Him and the other one. Them's the ones that cut Mr. Foxie so's he'd stomp Henny. I seen the tracks. This one, he stood outside the window and tied a knife to a long stick, and he reached right through the window and over the side of the stall and cut Mr. Foxie."

Daye said: "You . . . you were on the path?"

Cornelius nodded. "Yup. I got the other one, and I chased after this one, only he slipped around me some way and come here. I couldn't find no gun, so I only had the ax that I got out of the barn."

He pointed to the ax that lay beside George's limp form.

"I paid 'em," said Cornelius. "They went and killed Henny, and I paid 'em for it. Ain't nobody can kill my brother and not get paid for it."

"Hey!" a voice shouted. "Hey, there!"

Cornelius leaned over and picked up the ax. "Who's that? Who's that comin' huh?"

"It's all right," Daye said quickly. "It's a friend of mine. His name is Nippy Cooper." He turned his head to shout an answer. "Nippy! Over here!"

Nippy came tramping through the brush.

"Land o' goodness!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "This here is the darkest place to go huntin' around in I ever see!" He stared at George's body with wide eyes. "Another! This here swamp is plumb overloaded with corpses. I seen one back a ways."

"What are you doing here?" Daye asked suspiciously.

"Me? Oh, that fella wasn't hurt so bad after all. He come around after I had gone about two miles, and he started hollerin' and takin' on and wantin' to know where Mr. Foxie was. People sure are anxious about that animal. I told him you was huntin' for him, and he hoots and hollers that he's got to hunt, too. So I brung him back. I told him I'd look, and so he's settin' in my car back on the road. He's kinda weak, but he sure can yell loud, so I guess he ain't in no danger."

"We found the horse," said Daye.

"So I notice," said Nippy, examining Mr. Foxie with admiring eyes. "He's a right smart fine-lookin' critter."

He walked up to Mr. Foxie unhesitatingly and patted him on the nose. Mr. Foxie seemed to like it. He reached out his head for more.

"Yes, sir," said Nippy. "You got yourself considerable of a horse there, Mr. Daye."

"Ain't hisn," said Cornelius. "That there horse belongs to Mrs. Hartway."

"Not no more," said Nippy.

"She gave it to me," Daye explained to Ruth. "I didn't want to take the horse, but Mrs. Hartway insisted."

"She gave . . . it to you?" Cornelius asked.

"Sure did," said Nippy. "I was right there and seen it with my own eyes." He patted Mr. Foxie on the nose again, looking sideways at Cornelius. "You talk like you come from over Stony Ridge way."

"Do," said Cornelius.

"That so?" said Nippy in a pleased voice. "Ain't never been there myself, but I got an uncle lives

in them parts. Name of Pappy Cooper. Got a wooden leg and a mean eye. You know him?"

"Seen him," said Cornelius.

"Oh, no, you ain't," said Nippy. "Because there ain't no such place as Stony Ridge, and I ain't got an uncle. And you ain't no hill folks, either. You're just a come-here tryin' to talk like you was hill folks. And don't you try flingin' that ax at me, or I'll catch it and fling it right back."

"I've got something better than an ax," said Cornelius. The ax slipped out of his fingers and fell to the ground, and then he was holding a short-barreled revolver. "Daye, you've got those papers on Mr. Foxie with you. You can indorse them over to me now. Just write down 'for due consideration.' These other two will sign as witnesses."

Daye watched him steadily. "It won't do you any good. You should know that. Any contract made under duress is unenforceable."

"There won't be anyone to testify it was made under duress," said Cornelius. "Get that paper out and indorse it."

A weak, thick voice muttered: "You rat. You dirty double-crosser."

George was sitting up, braced back against his extended left arm. His face was a red glistening mask of blood out of which his eyes stared glassily, fever-bright. He held the automatic waveringly in his right hand.

Incredibly fast, Cornelius whirled and fired twice. The bullets jerked George's body. His supporting left arm bent, and he went over backward in a stiff, twitching heap.

Daye hurled himself straight over the fire. He hit Cornelius just in back of the knees while the thin man was trying to turn back toward him, and they both went down in sliding tangle.

Ruth screamed, and Nippy was shouting: "Whoa! Whoa!" at Mr. Foxie, trying to hold him.

Cornelius heaved up under Daye's weight; got the revolver half raised before Daye shifted his grip, caught his right wrist. Cornelius fell backward, pulling Daye over on top of him, struggling to twist his wrist out of Daye's grasp. Daye held on grimly, trying to hit Cornelius with his other fist.

Cornelius seemed to have an endless, wiry strength. He heaved up to his feet again, bringing Daye with him, and their churning feet stamped the embers of the fire. Cornelius' thin fingers found Daye's throat, and then Daye tripped him. They went down in another awkward sprawl, and the shock of it loosened Daye's grip on Cornelius' wrist for an instant. The wrist twisted, and Daye felt the gun hard against his side.

He slid his fingers down over the cylinder, tried to squeeze it hard enough to prevent its turning. But he could feel it slipping bit by bit as the cartridge came around under the hammer. His fingers were cold with slippery sweat against the steel, and Cornelius' body pressed him hard against the ground.

The hammer clicked as it came back to full cock. Cornelius made a triumphant grunting noise, and Daye writhed on the ground, trying to get a new grip, trying to push the gun muzzle away.

Suddenly there was the quick thud of dancing hoofs all around them. Cornelius grunted once, and his gun came away easily in Daye's hand.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Nippy yelled.

One of the hoofs brushed Daye, and then he rolled clear of Cornelius and came up to his feet. Ruth was standing stiffly with her short stick half raised.

"Whoa!" said Nippy.

He had both arms around Mr. Foxie's neck, and the plunging horse carried him clear across the opening and back again. Finally he quieted, snorting nervously.

Ruth said: "I . . . I hit him." She raised the stick a little. "I . . . I've killed—"

"No, you didn't," said Nippy breathlessly. "I seen you hit at him, but you didn't connect. It was Mr. Foxie, here. He lammed that fella right on the bean with his hoof. He's the kickingest horse I ever see. I swear he is. Whoa!"

Daye said: "I can see it now. It was Cornelius all the time. I should have seen that George wouldn't bet as much as he did on guesswork. He had hired Cornelius to scare Mrs. Hartway with that hexing business, so she wouldn't run Mr. Foxie properly. Cornelius—through Henny—was going to give her a lot of phony advice. Cornelius was the one who cut Mr. Foxie."

"But . . . his own brother—" Ruth protested.

"He wasn't Henny's brother. Henny was just his stooge. Cornelius, when he saw the possibilities, decided to double-cross George. He meant to scare Mrs. Hartway enough so she would sell him Mr. Foxie for little or nothing, by telling her the hex had gone wrong. I don't think he meant to have Mr. Foxie kill Henny. He just wanted something that would look bad."

Daye paused, looking at Ruth. Her face was shadowed and pale in the dim firelight.

"I'm beginning to like horses—especially Mr. Foxie. But . . . I wouldn't know how to take care of him—alone."

Ruth didn't say anything, but her eyes answered him. Daye stepped close to her suddenly and swept her slim body against his. Her lips were soft and warm and yielding.

"Well, doggone me," said Nippy in amazement, still holding Mr. Foxie's head.

Daye murmured: "Right after the Rio Seco—you and I and Mr. Foxie will take a trip—"

"Takin' a horse on a honeymoon!" Nippy marveled. "I never hear tell of such. That's gonna shock Mirandy right out of her shakin' ague when I tell her!"

THE END.

the Vengeful Dane

by WALTER RIPPERGER

Peter Dane wasn't really bad, but nothing could swerve him from his sinister obsession to kill!

I.

Mordecai Breen sat in his stuffy little office, contemplating the future gloomily. Being a private detective wasn't all he had expected it to be. Perhaps he had been foolish to give up his job as ace reporter down at the *Daily Leader*. So far he had had only two clients, and these not very remunerative. He was behind in his office rent. He owed the landlady of the boardinghouse where he lived six weeks' lodging, and only that very morning she had made it clear in no uncertain terms that if he couldn't pay he'd have to vacate his room at the end of the week. She had another and more solvent applicant for Breen's room. Then there was that character in the outer office, an ex-prize fighter—Mordecai Breen's only assistant, who acted at one and the same time as stenographer, secretary and Operative No. 13—a character whom Breen had nicknamed Slap-happy. He owed Slap-happy a couple of weeks' salary, too.

Slap-happy didn't mind. He was a big roughneck with a flat, battered face, cauliflower ears, and serious but on occasion twinkling eyes. Slap-happy

had been known in the ring as One-round Musky, because of the fact that he had a veritable gift of getting himself knocked out in the first round, invariably ending up in the laps of ringside spectators. Slap-happy had the greatest faith in Mordecai Breen, whom he always addressed as "chief." He never questioned the ultimate success of the Breen Detective Agency. Faithfully and industriously he practiced daily on the secondhand battered typewriter on his desk, never losing his optimism or the feeling that some big case was bound to come along, a case where it would be necessary for him to type voluminous reports.

Just as Breen was finishing his third rye and ginger ale and putting the bottle and glass disconsolately back into the bottom drawer of his desk, Slap-happy came in beaming.

"We're signed up for a bout, chief," Slap-happy whispered hoarsely. "Looks like the main event, too, or at least the semifinal. Two guys out there to see you. They look like folding money to me—like they was in the chips."

Mordecai Breen's yellow-brown eyes brightened.

"One of 'em's got—" Slap-happy went on.

"Never mind. Show them in."

Mordecai Breen hastily fished in his inside pocket and found a letter. It happened to be a letter from a finance company assuring Breen that they would be happy to make him a personal loan—anything up to two hundred dollars on his personal effects, at very reasonable rates. No delays, no embarrassment. Breen, intently studying the letter in a preoccupied fashion while Slap-happy showed in the visitors, got the impression that the finance company was a very philanthropic institution whose sole aim in the world was to help people in need.

"Sit down," Mordecai Breen said, without looking up. He folded the letter, put it back in his pocket, then glanced up at the two men who had come in.

One was rather short, an elegant, dapper figure, smartly attired in a dark suit and a dark overcoat belted at the back. His Homburg hat was mouse-gray. He carried gray suède gloves in one of his small rather delicate hands; he wore gray spats. His features were narrow, his eyes gray and thoughtful. But it was his companion who spoke.

"I am Dr. Cecil Park-Minton," he said in a soft, cultured voice, "and this is my assistant, Dr. le Bar. Some time ago I received one of your circulars."

Mordecai Breen eyed Dr. Park-Minton. He was almost a head taller than his assistant. His attire was as perfect and as expensive as Dr. le Bar's. But he gave the impression of being the more prosperous and the more important. Perhaps it was only Dr. Park-Minton's overcoat that gave Breen that idea. Even to the most unitiated, it was obviously a costly garment. The cloth was black and soft, and the fur collar was expensive. It was plainly the work of a master tailor. But after all, Dr. Park-Minton's attire wasn't the most striking thing about him. It was the domineering way in which he held himself, his sensitive mouth that had something of cruelty in it, and it was his dark eyes—or, rather, eye. There was only one eye visible—a sinister, malevolent optic. Over the other—the left one—there was a black patch held in place by a silken cord that ran across Dr. Park-Minton's forehead.

Mordecai Breen said again, "Won't you sit down?"

Neither of the two made a move. Dr. Park-Minton let his one eye travel about the room, taking it in, then letting it come to rest on Mordecai Breen. It was as though he were trying to make up his mind whether or not he had come to the right place.

"I had expected," he said slowly, "a more elaborate establishment."

Mordecai Breen had a violent temper.

"What difference does it make?" he said irritably. "You didn't come here to live, did you?"

"No," said Dr. Park-Minton without emotion, "I'm just wondering." He kept that dark, almost black eye of his fastened on Mordecai Breen.

Breen wasn't much over average height. His shoulders were broad but not exceptionally so, nor did he appear of an unusually athletic build. Yet he gave the impression of having great strength. There was a sort of careless recklessness about him, a kind of arrogance—an arrogance that on occasion burned fiercely in his yellow-brown eyes.

Finally Dr. Park-Minton seemed satisfied. He sat down. Dr. le Bar sat down.

"Having but one assistant," Breen said without batting an eye, "you can imagine I am pretty busy. If you've got anything you want to talk to me about—"

Dr. le Bar's gray eyes swept the top of Breen's desk—a desk bare of any papers. His eyes flickered, but he said nothing.

"We came to you," Dr. Park-Minton said, speaking very slowly, "for two reasons. We want you to find a man for us. And we want you to act as a sort of bodyguard until this man is found. Considering the two together, you'll understand why I had hoped that yours would be a larger organization. And yet there is something about you that impresses me. I am a very good judge of character. One gets to be that way when one is in a profession such as mine."

"I suppose I ought to know who you are, but I don't," Breen said truculently.

"If you moved in different circles," Dr. Park-Minton said with a sort of careless complacency, "you'd known who I am. Cecil Park-Minton, the surgeon. Nor is my assistant, Dr. le Bar, without repute."

Breen looked into Park-Minton's one eye. It was an amazingly expressive eye. It suggested that the man was conscious of his superiority, that he was vain, evil, contemptuous of his fellowman, and

yet it somehow also suggested something else—apprehension.

"All right, you want me to find a man," Breen said. "Who is he?"

"He's a convict—an ex-convict."

"There are thousands of those," Breen said sarcastically. Dr. Park-Minton's manner, his cold deliberation, irritated him almost beyond endurance. "Will any convict do, or do you want some special one?"

"I want one very special one," Dr. Park-Minton said patiently. "His name is Peter Dane. He was released several days ago."

Breen, his voice flat, said: "All right. You want me to find him and you want a bodyguard. Why?"

"Because," Dr. Park-Minton said, "we have reason to believe, Dr. le Bar and I, that we're in danger. The man hates us. He wouldn't hesitate to kill us both if the chance arose." Dr. Park-Minton adjusted the patch over his left eye. It seemed an unconscious, instinctive gesture.

Breen stared. He didn't know why, but for some reason or other he disliked the two men, a dislike that amounted almost to antagonism, and yet a client was a client.

"Why don't you go to the police?" he asked bluntly. "That's what the police are for, to protect people. And they can probably find this Peter Dane easier than I can."

Dr. le Bar moistened his thin lips. He started to speak, changed his mind, and looked at Dr. Park-Minton.

"We don't wish to go to the police," Dr. Park-Minton said. "A man of my reputation can't afford to be mixed up with the police. As for your being able to find Dane, we think you won't have any trouble. He'll . . . he'll find us, and you'll be there. That is one of the reasons why we want you to act as a sort of bodyguard."

Breen shifted restlessly in his chair. He didn't get it.

"And if I find him, what? You still wouldn't be safe. You can't do anything to an ex-convict just by finding him. You can't have a guy locked up just for coming to see you even though he's been in jail."

Dr. Park-Minton's one eye gleamed malevolently. His sensitive, cruel mouth twisted itself into a line that was repulsive.

"That," he said, his voice thin, "is going to be your particular task. Peter Dane is going to try to kill one or both of us. You are to trap him, you are to catch him as he's trying to do it. That will suffice to send him back where he belongs—to prison. I am placing a great deal of trust in you—an enormous amount of trust, putting my life, Le Bar's life, into your hands. If you fail—"

Mordecai Breen let his eyes wander from Park-Minton to Dr. le Bar. The smaller man's face had gone ashen. His gray eyes were filled with fear.

"You don't . . . you don't," he said, "have to put it so graphically, do you, Park-Minton?"

Breen turned back to Park-Minton. Breen's yellow-brown eyes were hard, his mouth wolfish, and his voice harsh.

"I think I get it now," he said. "You want me to find this Peter Dane, to actually make it look to him as though it were easy for him to kill you, and then I trap him in the act."

Dr. Park-Minton's eye glittered. "My estimate of you was correct," he said, his voice full of satisfaction. "You get the idea perfectly. It's a difficult task, but I think you can accomplish it."

"I'm sure you can," Dr. le Bar added, his voice unsteady.

Mordecai Breen leaned forward. His big, strong hands closed over the edge of his desk.

"What . . . what did you two do to Dane that he'd want to kill you? Why are you afraid of him?"

Dr. Park-Minton drew back a little. Le Bar made a nervous noise deep down in his throat. A heavy stillness filled Mordecai Breen's musty little office—a stillness that seemed to blot out the *click-clack-clack-click* of Slap-happy's typewriter in the outer office. At long last, Dr. Park-Minton said:

"We did nothing . . . nothing to Peter Dane. He thinks we did. He's an unreasoning person, suffering under some delusion. Am I stating the case correctly, Le Bar?"

The little doctor nodded his head in eager agreement.

Breen glowered at them; then he leaned back in his chair.

"I don't think I want any part of this," he said with an air of finality.

The expression in Park-Minton's face didn't change, but Le Bar appeared crestfallen.

"Could you . . . could you recommend someone to us who might be interested?" he asked anxiously.

"Wait," Dr. Park-Minton said, before Breen could answer. "This is the man for us, Le Bar. I can feel it. I am sensitive to this sort of thing." He turned his head a little to one side so that his one eye could take in Mordecai Breen more fully. "You are dissatisfied," he said, "because we don't take you fully into our confidence. That is not because we distrust you; it's just because we can't. We feel that what has happened in the past is our business. You haven't heard my proposition yet. I think it will interest you. You are to devote your talents entirely to us until this matter is settled. You are to live with us. You will receive five hundred dollars a week, and at the conclusion of this affair, if you bring about the situation that I have outlined—or, rather, that you have outlined—you will receive five thousand dollars!"

Breen sucked in his breath. Five hundred dollars a week, with a possible five thousand! He disliked these two men, almost loathed them, and yet, what

the hell was he in business for? His landlady was going to throw him out in the street at the end of the week, and here he was being offered a home and being paid for living there. It seemed almost providential. But something told Mordecai Breen that if he took this case, he would be on the wrong side; that the man he ought to be working for was the ex-convict, Peter Dane. And yet that was silly. After all, if these two men stood in danger of their lives—and they certainly seemed to think so—it was up to him to protect them if he could. And besides, what was the use of being squeamish? There was money in this, and as far as he knew, this Dane might be a heel, a racketeer, a fiend. What was the use of turning down a good fee because of vague hunches?

"When do I start?" he said.

"Tonight," Dr. Park-Minton said. "I imagine you'll want to go home and pack a bag." He reached into his pocket and on the back of an old envelope scribbled his address. He pushed it across the desk.

Mordecai Breen made no move to take it. In the far recesses of his mind he still had a feeling that he shouldn't take it, that he should turn down the proposition.

"What's the matter with your eye?" he demanded irrelevantly.

A slow flush crept over Dr. Park-Minton's face. Hot anger flamed in his good eye. When he spoke, he hardly moved his lips.

"I am retaining you," he said, "for a specific purpose. Beyond that you will please mind your own business."

Mordecai Breen, sitting rigid, his yellow-brown eyes bleak, said: "I'm not retained yet." A stubborn look came to his mouth. "What's the matter with your eye?"

He clasped his hands behind his head, leaned far back and stared up at the ceiling, not interested in Park-Minton or Le Bar, not interested in the case.

For a time neither of the other two said anything, then:

"You're going to be difficult to get along with," Dr. Park-Minton said. The rage had gone out of his eye. There was a certain speculative quality in his tone, something of curiosity. "You're implying that unless I tell you about my eye, you're not going to take this case. You're an incredible sort of man, but that's what we need, Le Bar and I—an incredible sort of man. Look."

Mordecai Breen turned. Dr. Park-Minton raised the black patch. Breen had expected to see a sty, an infection of some sort, perhaps just an ordinary black eye. But he was wrong. There was no eye—only an empty socket.

Slowly, with unbelievable deliberation, Dr. Park-Minton let the patch fall back into place and leaned forward.

"Dane did that to me," he said. "Two years ago it was my eye, and next time it will be my life, unless—"

II.

On a street in the East Sixties stood the rooming house owned and managed by Tessie Bonville—pronounced "Boveel." In appearance it was no different from the rooming house that flanked it on either side—an old-fashioned brownstone affair with a high stoop leading up to the front door. Like the other houses it had a front yard with a plot of untidy, despairing brown-green grass. But there was a difference. Whereas all the other houses had vacancy signs in their windows and their various owners eagerly looked forward to the arrival of a new tenant, there was no vacancy sign in Tessie Bonville's house, and it was a matter of complete indifference to her whether or not a new tenant arrived.

Tessie was in her late fifties. She had once been rather lovely-looking, but the life she had led, and years of unceasing dissipation, had taken their toll. She was now rather fat and flabby. There were lines in her face. Her eyes were rheumy except on certain occasions when they were sharp, predatory, greedy. Her hair was dyed, a none-too-successful job, that resulted in a sort of dirty straw color. Yet Tessie was still not without vanity. She struggled unceasingly against the ravage of time and a life that had robbed her of every vestige of good looks. She had her hair done weekly. She put on enough make-up to enamel a bathtub. She made her lips a vivid red, and not content with that, she squeezed her ample figure into a corset that was too small for her, and tortured herself by forcing her spreading feet into shoes meant for a dainty ballet dancer. Tessie was a vicious woman, and yet good-natured, her good nature enhancing her viciousness.

Right now she sat in the front parlor behind a small oak desk, going over her accounts. The sums involved in these accounts were startling. Almost any ordinary hotel would have envied the amounts apparently earned by Tessie Bonville's shabby lodginghouse.

Somewhere in the far recesses of the house a bell tinkled faintly. Tessie didn't look up from her work, until presently there was a knock on the door. The door opened. Tessie's maid, a pock-marked Negress, stood there.

"There's a gen'man wants to see you, Miss Tessie," the maid said. "He done say his name is Mistah Dane. He done say Leverman sent him. Does you want to see him?" The pock-marked Negress' face was impassive. There was nothing in it to show that she had admitted so many men who had been sent by Leverman, during all the years she had been with Tessie.

Tessie said, "All right. Let him come in."

She fluffed up her hair, peered into a tiny mirror that lay on her desk, then waited. To be sure, the

characters that Leverman sent had never been particularly prepossessing individuals—that was natural enough—but there was still always a chance. And for once she was destined not to be disappointed.

The man who came in was handsome. Or at least he would have been handsome if it hadn't been for the things that life had done to him. He was young, tall, rather slender, yet well built. But there was a ghastly pallor about his face. His eyes were hollow, lifeless. He walked with a peculiar, almost slouching gait. There was a starved look about him—the look of a man who is not only physically starved, but spiritually as well.

"I'm Dane," he said in a mechanical sort of way, "Peter Dane. One of the guards, his name's Leverman—'screws,' they call them down there—thought it might be a good idea if I came to see you."

Tessie said: "Sit down. How long were you in for?"

Listlessly, Peter Dane sank into the chair she indicated. He gave the impression of having no interest in anything. It was as though he were not taking in what was happening now, as if his mind were dwelling only on the past and—the future.

"How long were you in for?" Tessie asked again. There was curiosity in her tired eyes. This man was different from any that Leverman had ever sent her before.

"Two years," Peter Dane said in that remote voice of his. "Felonious assault—first degree."

"They tell me," Tessie said, "that Graton is one of the toughest stirs in the country." She was trying to draw him out, somehow bring him to life.

Peter Dane looked at her as if he didn't quite comprehend, then:

"I wouldn't know."

Little lines formed above the bridge of Tessie's nose. She had a sudden conviction that for once Leverman had sent her a dud. This man was washed up. He could be of no use to her. He had nothing to sell, no secrets that would serve to enrich the safe-deposit boxes of Tessie Bonville. What in the world had gotten into Leverman? What had made Leverman think that in sending this Peter Dane to her he would be earning his customary commission?

"And what do you want from me?" Tessie said, her voice a little sharp.

Peter Dane appeared to consider the question. He rubbed his thin hands together, started to answer, then stopped. A door at the back opened.

A girl came in. Antoinette, Tessie Bonville's daughter. She was all that Tessie once had been—and more. Her features were regular, her hair was red, abundant. Her eyes were an off shade of blue that made them look green. They were wide apart and steady. Her lashes were long, curling, touched with kohl. She had a mouth that was full, generous and carmine. She was slim, but not too slim. There was something sinuous about her figure, about the way she held herself, and the manner in which she walked, her hips swaying, provocative.

Peter Dane gave her one brief, disinterested glance, then looked back at Tessie.

Antoinette looked startled. She wasn't used to having men, young men—and this man *was* young—content with looking at her so sparingly. She glanced at her mother.

"A new boarder?" Her tone was indolent.

"Leverman sent him," Tessie said shortly. "His name is Peter Dane."

Tessie Bonville harbored few grudges and no resentments, but in some vague way that she couldn't even explain to herself, she resented Antoinette. Antoinette was young, unbelievably desirable, and had all the things that she, Tessie, once had had.

"What does he want?" Antoinette drawled. She said it carelessly, as though Peter Dane weren't even there, but out of the corner of her eye she took in Peter Dane, his pallor, his lean, gaunt face.

He still didn't look at her.

"I don't know," Tessie said. She turned to Peter Dane. "What do you want?"

"A place . . . a place to stay," Peter Dane said slowly, "until—" He stopped.

"Until what?" Tessie asked.

It was a long time before Peter Dane answered. His lifeless eyes were fixed, staring into space. Then something came into them—hate, implacable hate. And more than that, unshakable determination.

The two women saw it and recognized it for what it was. There was something shattering about the look in Peter Dane's eyes, something devastating, almost overwhelming. Antoinette's carmine lips parted a little, but she said nothing. Tessie took as deep a breath as her tightly laced corset would permit.

Then Peter Dane spoke, his voice weary, low:

"Until I can kill a couple of men. After that . . . after that it doesn't matter."

Tessie started to say something and couldn't find the words. Antoinette said contemptuously:

"Stir crazy." She knew that wasn't true. She said that to rouse him, to make him look at her, to attract his attention.

Peter Dane kept his eyes on Tessie. The hate had gone out of them, leaving them dull, bleak as before.

"If Leverman sent you to me, he must have told you," Tessie said impatiently, "what sort of a place I run. I don't take in ex-convicts that have nothing to offer. This isn't a charity institution. This . . . this is a business." Tessie was angry. Leverman was a fool, and this Peter Dane was a bigger fool. The idea that he could come here, live here at her expense, just so that he could bump off a couple of guys!

For seconds Peter Dane looked at her without comprehension, the lines in his lean face deepening until they looked like gashes. Then he rose, twisting the cheap slouch hat that he held between his fingers.

"Sorry to have troubled you," he muttered. "Leverman—" Slowly he started for the door.

He had almost reached it when Antoinette's voice stopped him.

"Wait," she said. She went up to him and stood looking into his eyes, her own challenging. He stared at her dully, twisting his hat. "You're all tied in knots," she said. "You're frozen. You need somebody—somebody to thaw you out."

She waited for some response, but there wasn't any. Only after a long time he said:

"I've got to be getting along."

Antoinette spun around facing her mother.

"He can stay," she declared.

"You're crazy!" Tessie said. "What's the sense?"

Peter Dane's hand was on the doorknob. He was turning it. Antoinette placed her slim hand on his wrist.

"You can stay," she said.

"I've got to be getting—"

Antoinette, breathing fast, softly said: "You can stay. We'll help you . . . we'll help you kill your two men!"

Again life came into Peter Dane's eyes and again it was hate.

"You don't have to help me. I'll do it by myself. I just . . . I just want a place to stay. I haven't . . . I haven't any money."

His hand fell away from the doorknob.

Late that day Sergeant Hammerstein of the homicide squad ambled into Mordecai Breen's office.

"So you got a client again," Hammerstein said with jovial malice. "That makes three, as far as I know, since you've turned sleuth. Boy, are you making good!"

Breen scowled at him. He moved the bottle of rye a few inches and said truculently:

"Help yourself." At the same time he took out a glass from the drawer of his desk and put it beside the bottle.

The sergeant poured himself a generous portion. He drank it neat. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then:

"You haven't got any coffee beans, have you, or sompn? I might run into the inspector—"

"Did you get the dope I asked you for?" Breen said fretfully. He was preoccupied, disturbed by this case that had come his way. Everything about it seemed to him wrong, and he didn't know why.

Hammerstein shook his head wonderingly.

"A screwy reporter with a punch-drunk prize fighter playing detective. It just doesn't make sense. If it wasn't for me—"

"The hell with you," Breen said. "I phoned you about a guy named Dane—Peter Dane. Did you find out anything or didn't you? If you just came here to lap up my liquor—"

"A good idea," Hammerstein said, and helped himself to another drink. Then: "It happens I know all about this Dane, or at least all there is to know about him. I was in court when he was being tried a couple of years ago. I had a case of my own. This Dane didn't have any lawyer, didn't want one. He just wanted to plead guilty. It was the damnedest thing."

"What's so damned about it?" Breen snarled. He didn't have much time. He had to go home and pack a few things and get to Park-Minton's house.

"Dane was charged with felonious assault in the first degree. He was a nice-looking young fellow, only his face was kind of stony like he was one of those trees, you know—"

"Petrified," Breen said grumpily.

"Yeah," Hammerstein said, "only I thought that was the same as being ossified—you know, the way you get." Hammerstein grinned. "Dane beat up a doctor, one of those high-society doctors who won't prescribe an aspirin without charging you five hundred bucks—a fellow named Park-Minton. This Dane, when it came to beating a guy up, was sompn. He'd made a wreck out of Park-Minton. Not only that, but he knocked down Park-Minton a couple of times, and the second time Park-Minton hit an andiron in the fireplace. He hit it with his eye, and that was all there was to it. He lost his eye. It was the damnedest—"

"Hell's bells!" Breen snapped. "Don't start that again. What happened?"

"The damnedest thing," Hammerstein went on unhurriedly, "was the way this Dane behaved during the trial. He wouldn't defend himself, he wouldn't say why he beat up Park-Minton. He just stood there taking it, as if it didn't matter, as if he were already thinking of sompn he was going to do at some time or other in the future. The judge gave him two years. Dane didn't say anything for a minute. He turned away from the judge and looked at Park-Minton and a little guy—I forgot his name, Baron or sompn; he was witness—"

"Le Bar," Breen interjected.

"All right, Le Bar. Dane looked at the two of them and said sompn. He didn't say it very loud. Nobody much could hear it but me, because I was right there. I guess Park-Minton and Le Bar heard it. Anyway, Le Bar, the little guy, turned a kind of sickly green."

"What did Dane say?"

"All he said was, 'I'll be back in two years.'"

III.

There was a knock on the door. Peter Dane said, "Come in."

The room that the pock-marked Negress had

given him was small and cheaply furnished, but it was comfortable enough. Whether or not it was comfortable didn't matter anyhow to Peter Dane. He had been sitting there with his hands clasped, staring down at the floor for hours, ever since his interview with Tessie and Antoinette. He said again, listlessly, "Come in."

Antoinette entered. She had changed into a dinner dress of some shimmering sea-green material—a dress that emphasized every line of her magnificent figure. There was a sparkling star-shaped hair clip in her red hair. The clip was green, almost the color of her eyes. Walking with that swaying, easy grace of hers, she came up to Peter Dane and smiled at him.

Peter Dane stood up and stared at her with bleak, disinterested eyes. She gave a little toss to her head.

"You don't . . . you don't take much interest in . . . in things," she said. Her ordinarily husky voice was a little metallic.

"I take an interest in some things."

"Two men you want to kill?"

Peter Dane's shoulders moved, but he said nothing.

A half minute went by, then Antoinette said:

"Dinner will be in about an hour. I thought I'd come and take you downstairs to meet the others beforehand. It'll be easier that way."

"I don't want to meet anybody. I just want to stay here, be let alone until . . . until I've done what I want to do. Then I'll be on my way."

She shook her head. "That won't do," she said. "The others wouldn't like it if there was someone here who they didn't know, who hadn't been properly introduced to them by ma or me. The men here are a little different from the sort of men you'd meet at any other boardinghouse. When Leverman sent you, he must have made that plain to you. Don't worry. They won't ask you any questions and they won't expect you to ask them any. Everyone's business here is his own. Only ma and I, we ask questions, and we direct things. Nobody does anything without being told what they're to do."

Peter Dane looked as though he didn't comprehend. His lean features stayed expressionless.

Her voice sharpened. "You get what I mean, don't you?"

Peter Dane's eyes flared up briefly, then grew vague. His mouth went into a thin, straight line.

"Snap out of it," she said. "You're all nerves. Your brain isn't working. You talk about killing people. We don't go much for that sort of thing. There's other better and safer games. But if you want to kill somebody, that's your affair, providing . . . providing it's done so it doesn't get us in trouble. When you come to life, we'll talk about it. You'll need help."

"Help? Who'd want to help me?"

Antoinette smiled again. "There are half a dozen men downstairs and any one of them will do just as I say. If I tell them . . . if I tell them to jump in the river, they'll jump."

For the first time Peter Dane's eyes seemed to focus on her, seemed to take in her person.

"I guess . . . I guess that's so," he said slowly.

She studied him with a perplexed expression, unable to understand why she wasn't making any impression on him. Men coming out of prison after years—young men—were eager to see women, were satisfied with women far less prepossessing than she was. But not this one. She obviously meant nothing to him. Well, there was time.

"Come," she said. For a moment she rested her hand on his arm, felt his muscles, muscles that were taut, unresponsive, and not pliable.

She went out and he followed her downstairs to the basement, into a large room. There was a pool table at one end of the room. Three men were playing Kelly pool. Two others were watching in chairs tilted back against the wall. At a card table, two more were playing pinochle. Everyone seemed to stop as Antoinette, with Dane a little behind her, came into the room.

Peter Dane took them in without interest. They were of different heights, different builds, different ages, and of course their faces were different. And yet they all had something in common. It was their expression. Their faces were closed, secretive, and their mouths were tight-lipped.

Antoinette led Dane up to the pool table where a big man with sandy hair and dull opaque eyes had been mechanically chalking his cue. The big man was devouring Antoinette with his lackluster eyes. The nostrils of his flat nose quivered.

"Harry the Ox," Antoinette said, motioning with her head toward the big man.

"How's the girl?" Harry the Ox said. His voice was tight, constricted. He didn't look at Dane.

Antoinette smiled tantalizingly at Harry the Ox. The big man put the chalk down on the table and placed a huge hand on Antoinette's shoulder.

"Everything all right?"

Antoinette made no move to shake off the hand, but angry flames flared up in her eyes. Without lifting her voice, she said:

"Take your paws off me."

Harry the Ox flushed. He took his hand away.

"Touchy," he muttered.

"Touchy," Antoinette said, "but not touchable—not by you."

Nobody laughed. Nobody said anything.

Antoinette turned to the two others at the pool table.

"Gimpy Myer," she introduced, "and Dan Weaver."

Gimpy Myer," was about thirty-five, five feet eight, with a ferretlike face and shoe-button eyes. His hair was black and sleek, his frame narrow, flat-chested. Weaver was shorter, a stocky individual,

with a low, sloping forehead, a sharp nose, and a thick mouth. Like the others, he nodded briefly in Peter Dane's direction, then he gazed at Antoinette. There was a hungry look in his eyes and his hands, which were extraordinarily large, opened and closed.

Antoinette ignored him. She waved to the two men who sat leaning against the wall. One, a blond man with strong, regular features and a cleft chin, she called Halverson. Halverson's eyes were cobalt-blue and he kept them away from Antoinette. The other she introduced as Baron Lush. The baron was the tallest of them all. He was broad-shouldered, had soft brown eyes and a wide, gentle mouth. He stood up and bowed from the waist when Antoinette introduced him.

Now she indicated the card table where one of the men—the one who was shuffling the cards—sat facing Dane.

"Louis Davis," Antoinette said, meaning the man who was shuffling the cards, "and the other, with his back to you, is Limehouse Johnny. And this, gentlemen, is Peter Dane."

Again the men nodded. There was no interest in their faces, no welcome, or the reverse, in their expressions. Ther faces remained closed. Harry the Ox started chalking his cue again, but the little man, the last who had been introduced, Limehouse Johnny, rose slowly at the mention of Peter Dane's name. He came over, stood directly in front of Dane, and looked up at him. Then he held out his hand and said:

"Hello, Pete."

Peter Dane took the outstretched hand. Antoinette looked startled. For the first time since she had seen him, that frozen look for a brief instant left Peter Dane's face. There was a glimmer of warmth in his eyes, and Antoinette couldn't understand it.

Limehouse Johnny was just a little rat, hardly in a class with the rest of the clientele that patronized Tessie Bonville's rooming house. He was an insignificant-looking fellow, emaciated, with a pinched face, gray nondescript eyes, and gray scraggly hair. Why should he, of all people, arouse any interest, get any response from this man who was so grim, so remote? To Dane, Antoinette said:

"Do you know him?"

"Sure," Limehouse Johnny answered. "Me and Pete, we was roommates at one time." He stopped talking and gazed up at Peter Dane, an anxious, almost worried expression in his gray eyes.

From the card table, Louis Davis called: "Come on, let's finish the game,"

Limehouse Johnny seemed reluctant to go, then he turned and walked black slowly.

The pock-marked Negress came in.

"Dinner am ready, Miss Antoinette," she said, and went out again.

The men at the pool table put down their cues and went over to the washbasin.

Antoinette didn't wait for any of them. To Peter Dane she said, "Come," and led the way to an adjoining room. It was almost as large as the game room. The table was set for ten.

Tessie was already sitting at the head of the table. Tessie's glance traveled swiftly back and forth between Dane and her daughter. There was a speculative look in Tessie's rheumy eyes. She was a woman of the world, had vast experience, and was nobody's fool. She didn't mind a flirtation, a passing affair, but anything beyond that was out. Antoinette seriously in love would not be so valuable as Antoinette carefree and unattached. Some sixth sense told Tessie that in some curious way this newcomer, Dane, had done something to Antoinette, that somehow he had captured her imagination. Perhaps it meant nothing, and then again—

"Sit here, Dane," Tessie said, indicating a place on her right, "and you, Antoinette, sit down there at the other end, next to the baron, when he comes in."

Antoinette smiled at her mother and sat down next to Peter Dane. Tessie sank her little sharp teeth into her lower lip, but made no comment. One by one, others came in until they were all there, seated.

Idly, now that they were together, Peter Dane took them in again. Subconsciously it struck him how well groomed they were, how well dressed, that he alone of them all was a shabby-looking character, that he alone looked like a down-and-out ex-convict, and he didn't care. It didn't matter. Nor did the conversation matter or interest him. It was idle chatter. Fragments occasionally registered with him—something about the Yankees always winning the pennant; something about the heavyweight wrestling championship; about a burlesque show; the war news.

Antoinette watched him covertly out of the corner of her eye. Once, irritably, she said:

"For Heaven's sake, don't you ever say anything?"

A fleeting look of surprise came into Peter Dane's face, as though it were unreasonable for anyone to expect him to talk.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess . . . I guess I've sort of forgotten how to talk."

Tessie grinned maliciously at her daughter, then frowned. The Negress came and took the soup plates away. She brought an enormous roast beef and put it down in front of Tessie. Tessie carved large, generous portions. Peter Dane watched her, a sudden gleam coming into his eyes.

Antoinette studied Dane. Was he hungry? What had suddenly aroused him? Was it the jewels on Tessie's hand, jewels that glittered as her hand went deftly back and forth with the carving knife? Antoinette half turned in her chair so that she could see him better. He didn't notice her at all.

His own eyes seemed riveted on Tessie's hand, carving the beef. At last they were all served. Peter Dane made no move to touch his plate. His eyes were on the platter now—on the carving set.

Antoinette experienced a queer sensation, something that she couldn't possibly explain to herself. At last she could stand it no longer. Her hand closed hard over his arm.

"What the hell is it?" she hissed inelegantly. "What are you staring at?"

Without turning to look at her, in a far-off voice as if he were not conscious of actually saying it, Peter Dane said:

"That knife. It's a sharp knife."

Hours later there was a timid knock on the door of Peter Dane's room. It opened and Limehouse Johnny came in. He closed the door softly behind him and stood looking at Peter Dane, his eyes troubled, uncertain. After a long time Limehouse Johnny said:

"It's none of my business, Pete, I know, but what are you doing 'ere?"

"Just staying here, Johnny, for a while."

"You oughtn't to stay 'ere," Limehouse Johnny said. "It's not the place for you."

"Why not?" Dane said. "If it's all right for you and the rest, why isn't it all right for me?" Harsh bitterness crept into Peter Dane's voice. "I'm an ex-convict like you and the others."

"We're different," Limehouse Johnny said with mild insistence. "We're professional crooks. We're thieves, rats. We're against everybody wot's against us. We don't know wot's right and wrong. I knew once, but I've forgotten now. We ain't even decent crooks. We don't take much chances. We just go in for blackmail and badger games and things like that. We ain't even decent blackmailers because we even blackmail our own kind—ex-cons, people wot 'ave been in stir, that made good after they got out. Most of us knows somebody like that. Leverman sees to it that the right people are sent 'ere to see Tessie and Antoinette. They're the brains and the front." Limehouse Johnny stopped. The anxiety in his eyes mounted. "You wouldn't go in for anything like that, Pete, would you?"

"No," Peter Dane said dully. "I'm just here because Leverman sent me."

"'Ave you got any money, I mean real money?"

"No," Dane said. "I had a little once, but I spent it all years ago."

Limehouse Johnny looked perplexed.

"I don't get it. Leverman's smart, 'e is. 'E knows what 'e's doing. If you 'ad any money, I could understand 'is sending you 'ere so you could be bled white. You 'aven't got a secret, Pete, 'ave you?"

"Yes, I've got a secret," Peter Dane said with dull unwillingness. "But there's no money in it."

"I don't mean to be pryin'—"

"I know, Johnny. Don't bother about me. Take my word for it, there's no money in this, just—"

The little man ran his fingers through his scraggly hair. His pale eyes clouded. He turned as if to go, then turned back again.

"I owe you something, Pete?"

"You owe me nothing."

"'Ave you still got that scar?"

"I guess so, yes," Dane said listlessly.

He wished the little man would go. He wanted to sit there and think. He was thinking now even while he spoke, but not about the things that Limehouse Johnny was saying. He was thinking about that carving knife with the long, narrow blade.

Limehouse Johnny came closer. He put a shy hand on Peter Dane's arm.

"I'm not much, Pete," he said; "just a rat like the others, and only a little rat at that, but—I don't forget. Promise me somethin', Pete. Don't do anything crazy without telling me first. I'm not much, but I know my way about, and maybe I can . . . and maybe I can help."

Peter Dane nodded absently. Limehouse Johnny got as far as the door when Dane suddenly came to life. There was a weird light in his stark eyes.

"I haven't any money, Johnny," he said. "If you want to help—"

"I got plenty," Limehouse Johnny said, reaching into his pocket.

Dane shook his head. "I don't want any money, but if you want to help, there's something you could do for me. You know your way about in this place.

You know where the kitchen is. If I tried to find it, I'd probably just stumble into somebody. There's a knife, Johnny; a long, thin carving knife. They used it tonight."

"I saw you looking at it," Limehouse Johnny said, his tone soft, rasping. "It's like that, huh?" Limehouse Johnny's pale eyes seemed to recede far back into his head.

"Well?"

"A gun's better, Pete," Limehouse Johnny said. "I can get you a gun. A gun's quicker. You can

Limehouse Johnny rose slowly at the mention of Peter Dane's name. He stood directly in front of Dane and said, "Hello, Pete."

get away. You don't 'ave to be on top of a man. With a knife you never know." Limehouse Johnny looked away from Dane. Irresolutely he shifted from one foot to the other, and waited.

"I don't want a gun," Peter Dane said. "I want a knife."

IV.

It was late the next afternoon that Leverman's note concerning Peter Dane reached Tessie Bonville. It was carefully, almost piously, worded, so that anyone who saw it and who was unfamiliar with the sort of ménage that Tessie ran would think that Leverman, the guard at Graton Prison, was a kindly, solicitous individual, who was interested in the future of convicts who had served their time. The note read:

Dear Mrs. Bonville:

I have recommended your place to a man named Peter Dane who was released a couple of days ago. Dane is an unusual man, much different from most of the people sent here to do time. You know I'm always interested in men like that. I treat them fair when they're down here, and I like to think that they're going to get on their feet after they leave here. I don't know much about Dane. Maybe I'm making a mistake in sending him to you. He never said anything much about himself while he was here, but what I hear from some friends of mine in New York, the judge gave him a two-year stretch for giving a guy named Park-Minton the works.

Park-Minton's a doctor, and big stuff, I understand. I thought maybe that he would be kind-hearted and that if you got in touch with him he might like to do something for Dane. Maybe he would feel sorry that he had lodged a complaint that resulted in such a severe sentence, which very likely is very liable to ruin the career of a young man.

I hope something will come of this as I should like to see Dane get on his feet.

Yours,

L.

Without comment, Tessie passed the note to her daughter, while she stared frowningly into space. She understood Leverman's note well enough. Leverman was shrewd; he suspected that a man of Dane's caliber wouldn't have assaulted a man so severely as to receive a two-year sentence unless there was more to this than lay on the surface. But Leverman wasn't sure. "Maybe I'm making a mistake," he had written. But then farther on in the note he'd written that if Tessie got in touch with Park-Minton, the doctor might want to do some-

thing for Dane. Leverman hadn't meant that Park-Minton would *want* to do something for Dane, but that he might be *made* to do something. Leverman hoped that something would come of this. Naturally he'd hope that, otherwise there'd be no commission for Leverman. Tessie looked at Antoinette.

"What do you think?"

"I think Leverman knows what he's talking about," Antoinette said. Her green eyes were unreadable and the frown on Tessie's face deepened.

"Can you get it out of him?" she asked.

"I think so," Antoinette said, a mocking smile on her full lips.

Tessie's rheumy eyes clouded. She didn't like the expression in Antoinette's face; she didn't like her tone; she didn't like the whole thing. She knew where she stood with the run-of-the-mine convict that Leverman sent her, but this Dane was different. And there was Antoinette—Antoinette for the first time in her life seemingly really interested in a man.

"I'll see what I can do," Antoinette said, and walked out.

She went straight to her room and rang for the Negress. When the maid came, Antoinette said:

"See if Johnny is around. If he is, send him to me."

"Yes'm," the pock-marked Negress said, and disappeared.

Antoinette sat down in front of her dressing table, fluffed up her glossy red hair, retouched her lips, and powdered a complexion that was already flawless.

Presently there was a knock, and then Limehouse Johnny came in. His manner was diffident, shy. He had never been in Antoinette's room. In fact, none of Tessie Bonville's boarders had. The room seemed to overwhelm Limehouse Johnny. It was a luxurious, thoroughly feminine chamber. The four-poster bed was high, covered with rich silk. The draperies at the windows were soft and came down to the floor. The carpet was thick. But it was the dressing table with its three-sided mirror that particularly fascinated Limehouse Johnny. It was a thing of shiny glass and silk. On its glass top there were bottles, jars, and two lamps. In the soft glow of the lamps, the bottles sparkled. They held perfumes, astringent lotions, and beauty creams. Limehouse Johnny had to guess at the creams, but he was sure of the perfumes. Their odor filled the room, made him feel a little giddy. Limehouse Johnny, in the course of his turbulent life, had known some women, but no one that even came close to Antoinette.

Antoinette turned from the dressing table and faced Johnny. She was smiling, perfectly aware of the impression the room and she herself were making on the little man.

"Sit down, Johnny," she said. "I want to talk to you." Her tone was vibrant, appealing.

"You . . . you wanted to see me," Limehouse Johnny said.

He was embarrassed, a little overwhelmed. He made no move to sit down, looking askance at the delicate silk-covered chairs.

"It's about Dane," Antoinette said. "You knew him before he came here. Tell me about him."

Limehouse Johnny stiffened. His embarrassment fell away from him. He forgot about the room, the perfumes, and Antoinette. He made his lips tight and his eyes opaque.

"He was in stir with me," he said. "That's all I know about 'im."

That was a lie and Antoinette knew it. Limehouse Johnny was hiding something from her. But Antoinette, womanwise, didn't say so. A hurt look came into her face.

"You don't like me, do you, Johnny?" she said.

Limehouse Johnny looked startled, bewildered. "Why, sure, Antoinette," he said. "What makes you say that?"

Antoinette shook her head as though she knew better. "You never come near me. You never—well, you never try to make any passes at me the way all the others do."

"I . . . I wouldn't do that. What would *you* see in me?" Limehouse Johnny said. It was plain that the whole conversation had taken a turn that was beyond his comprehension. He felt, too, that somehow he had been put in the wrong and that he had to defend himself. "'Alverson, the Swede," he said urgently, "doesn't make any passes at you."

Antoinette wanted to laugh, but she didn't. "Halverson makes passes at me," she said simply, "not with his hands, but with his eyes. He doesn't look at me often, because he knows I know."

Limehouse Johnny shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. The whole thing was beyond him. This was a different Antoinette from the one he knew. The Antoinette he was accustomed to was careless, decisive, contemptuous of Tessie's boarders, made them keep their distance with no effort at all. It couldn't be—Limehouse Johnny's heart began to beat faster—it couldn't be that she liked him, *really* liked him. No, that couldn't be. Alongside of Harry the Ox, of the baron, or even Gimpy Myer, he, Limehouse Johnny, was nothing.

"You don't trust me, do you?" Antoinette said pathetically. "It's funny that the one person in this place that I trust—that's you, Johnny—shouldn't trust me."

"Why, sure I trust you," Limehouse Johnny said, more and more confused.

Antoinette shifted her ground.

"Don't you like Dane?"

"Sure I like Dane," Limehouse Johnny said. "I like 'im better than . . . than anyone. There's nothing wot I wouldn't do for Dane."

Antoinette rose and came over to where Johnny

stood. She was taller than he. She bent down a little so that he could look into her eyes.

"Don't you understand, Johnny? That's the way I feel about it. I want to save him. He's going to get into trouble. He wants to kill somebody—two men. He's not like the rest of you here. He wouldn't know how to go about it without getting caught." A vehemence came into Antoinette's voice that she hadn't intended. "Do you want to see him caught? Do you want to see him sent to the chair? What kind of a pal are you? You say you like him. I tell you he's going to try to kill somebody. He's crazy. He's all tied into knots. He doesn't care what happens to him. But I . . . I do."

Limehouse Johnny backed away. He couldn't think, not with her so close to him, not with her eyes—those flaming green eyes of hers—boring into his.

"Let me think," Limehouse Johnny said. "Give me time to think."

Antoinette considered. Generally it was a mistake to give a man time to think. But something told her that Limehouse Johnny was different, and unless he could think and work it out in his own way, she'd get nothing out of him. She walked to the dressing table, took a cigarette from a silver humidor, and lighted it. Then she sat down and waited.

Limehouse Johnny walked around the room in a distrait fashion. Once he stopped at the dressing table, stared at the array of bottles without seeing them, then at last he came and stood in front of Antoinette. It was Antoinette's turn to be surprised.

Limehouse Johnny's voice, when he spoke, was indescribably harsh, somehow savage. There was a light in his nondescript eyes.

"If you're lying to me, if you're going to double-cross Pete, I'll kill you. I'll kill you as sure as I'm standing 'ere."

Antoinette had never been afraid before. She wasn't afraid of Harry the Ox, or Dan Weaver, or Halverson, or the baron. And yet now, curiously enough, she was afraid of this little man, Limehouse Johnny, whom she had scarcely ever noticed, whom she wouldn't have noticed if it hadn't been for the fact that he had known Peter Dane.

"I've told you the truth, Johnny," Antoinette said. She gave an almost imperceptible toss of her head, a proud gesture of which she herself was unconscious. "I want to save Dane. What is he to you, anyway?" she added curiously. "I didn't know there was anybody whose throat you—or anyone else in this place—wouldn't cut, if it paid you."

Limehouse Johnny smiled with his lips only. His face was still hard. "I'll tell you what 'e is to me. I'll tell you so that you'll know. And if you play 'im a dirty trick, if you use 'im to make money, or get 'im into trouble, I'll kill you if . . . if it's the last thing I do. Graton's a tough prison and I'm a rat, and I know it. About a year ago a 'alf dozen cons planned to make a break. They took me in with them. I figured it wouldn't work and I figured something else. I figured if I went to the warden and told 'im about it, it would make things easier for me. I was getting to a point where I was going stir crazy. I figured that if I told the warden, I'd get some time off and I'd get out of that hell-hole before I went out of my mind. So I told 'im. They let the cons make the break. They caught them and they made it pretty tough for them after that. I was with the bunch when we made the break just so I wouldn't be suspected, but you can't get away with that sort of thing. I don't know 'ow things leak out in a prison. I guess some of them must 'ave noticed that the warden wasn't making it as tough for me as 'e did for the others."

"Was Dane one of them?"

Limehouse Johnny shook his head. "No. They wouldn't take a fellow like 'im in. Only regulars. They figured I was regular, but I wasn't. Nothing 'appened for six months. Dane and me and a con named Tovesky was working in the machine shop every day. Tovesky wasn't there for a while. 'E was the leader, the guy that 'ad planned the getaway, and 'e 'ad 'ad to do a stretch in the 'ole—solitary. And when 'e came out and they put 'im back in the machine shop alongside of me, I was scared. Tovesky was big and 'e always was sort of fierce. But after the solitary, 'e came out looking like an animal. I was scared because I thought 'e might suspect me for 'aving played stool pigeon. I asked the warden to 'ave me transferred to some other job—any kind of a job, even to making jute sacks, the place where your lungs finally get eaten away. I told the warden I was scared of Tovesky. The warden wouldn't pay any attention to me, told me not to worry, that Tovesky, after the time 'e'd done in the 'ole, wasn't going to bother anybody. And then it 'appened!

"Nobody knows 'ow those things start in a prison—who gives the signal—but all of a sudden it was like all 'ell broke loose in that machine shop. Everybody began pounding with 'ammers and wrenches, yelling at the top of their lungs, so that the guards wouldn't know which way to turn. One man knew—that was Tovesky. All the others 'ad started that racket just so 'e'd get 'is chance at me. There was a file in 'is 'and, a file 'e 'ad sharpened, so you could punch it through an oak tree. And 'e 'ad me down on my back, sitting on top of me, telling me what a rat I was." Limehouse Johnny stopped. His face was ashen. Tiny beads of perspiration were trickling from his forehead down to his chin.

Antoinette watched him breathlessly, her ordinarily soft, pliant body tense.

"That's where Dane came in," Limehouse Johnny said in a drained voice. "He jumped for Tovesky, and that file—instead of going into me—went into Dane. The guards came and it was all over. They

took Dane to the prison 'ospital. It was weeks before 'e got out. So you see—" Limehouse Johnny made a gesture with his hands, then stopped.

Antoinette sat there, a curiously entranced expression on her face. It was as though she had been transferred into another world, not a world of prisons—she was familiar enough with that—but into a world where men did things without the thought of gain, without a thought of the consequences.

"What about Dane?" she whispered. "Why does he want to kill people—two people? Didn't he tell you?"

"After 'e got out of the 'ospital," Limehouse Johnny said, "they put 'im in a cell with me. 'E was sort of unpopular with the rest of the cons, the same as I was now. But it didn't bother 'im none. Just think of 'im risking his life for a rat like me wot wasn't anything to 'im. None of the cons was anything to 'im. 'E was always sort of . . . sort of apart. And when my time was up, Pete 'ad another six months to go. I sort of 'ated to leave 'im."

"But didn't he tell you . . . didn't he tell you why he wanted to kill the two men? You were in the same cell together. He must have talked."

" 'E didn't talk much; 'e never talked much. Only when 'e first got out of the 'ospital, 'e said something. I said, 'I'm glad you didn't die, Pete,' and 'Thanks,' and 'e looked at me in a kind of a funny way. 'I couldn't die,' he said. 'There's a couple of men where I come from that have got to die before I do.' " Somehow or other Limehouse Johnny managed to say that in the same way Antoinette had heard Dane talk, in that far-off, frozen way, as though he were looking at, addressing a distant mountain.

She shivered. Her eyes were alight, her lips parted. She was breathing softly.

"We can't let him do it, Johnny," she said, her tone insistent, yet calculating. "He'll be caught."

Johnny said: " 'E's *got* to do it. 'E can't live unless 'e does it."

Antoinette leaned forward.

"We have half a dozen men here. Any of them could do it without being nabbed." She waited, then: "If the two men he wants to kill were dead, that would end it, wouldn't it?"

Limehouse Johnny looked startled.

"We don't know who they are."

"I think I know at least one of them," Antoinette said, "and it ought to be easy to find out who the other is."

Limehouse Johnny screwed up his thin face. Deep lines formed on his forehead.

" 'Ow are you going to make 'em do it?" he asked. "Why would 'Arry the Ox, or the baron, or Gimpy, or any of them do it?"

Antoinette stood up. For a long time she looked intently at Limehouse Johnny. Then:

"Perhaps I could persuade them. I might tell them there was money in it. I don't know—"

"You'll 'ave to work fast," Limehouse Johnny said, his voice flat.

"Why?"

" 'E's got a knife—one of the carving knives. I gave it to 'im."

Antoinette stiffened. A feeling of unreasoning anger swept over her. Johnny was a fool. Why had he done a thing like that? The next minute she got hold of herself. She could understand perfectly why Johnny would do a thing like that. She smiled at Johnny, the same warm, intimate smile.

"I guess it doesn't matter, anyhow," she said. "Maybe I couldn't make the others do it. They're not like you and me, Johnny. Not like you. Dane doesn't mean a thing to them. What the hell would they care if he went to the chair? I'd care. You—" She broke off abruptly. There was an unnatural brilliance in her eyes as she stood looking steadily at Limehouse Johnny. "If the two men were dead—"

Limehouse Johnny wanted to move, he wanted to turn away and couldn't. It was becoming all too clear to him that she was right. He was a rat, a thief, a blackmailer. And yet— Little by little every vestige of color went out of Limehouse Johnny's face. His frail body quivered a little. He dropped his eyes.

"I guess," he said, "it's up to me. I . . . I should have thought of that right away. I . . . I should have done it without thinking. Pete didn't stop to think when Tovesky—"

"Johnny says you want to see me," Peter Dane said.

He looked about Antoinette's room, much as Limehouse Johnny had done. But for some reason she couldn't understand, he frowned, almost scowled.

"Yes," Antoinette said. "You've got to promise me something. You remember it was me who fixed it so you could stay here. Mother didn't want you."

"I can go."

She paid no attention to that.

"It's about those two men you want to kill. I want you to promise me not to do anything for a while, for a couple of weeks."

Peter Dane stared at her, his eyes brooding, then he shook his head, but said nothing.

She looked at him with exasperation. Was there no way of getting to him, no way of penetrating the wall he had built around himself? She took swift strides until she was directly in front of him. She placed both her hands on his shoulders. She drew him toward her until her body was flat against his.

"Come to life," she whispered. "Everything will be all right. Come to life."

For seconds he stood unresisting without a move,

then he jerked himself away. His face was gray, drawn; there was rage in his eyes. He put a hand against her shoulder and sent her reeling backward. She almost lost her balance.

Antoinette stared at him, speechless. Her face was a dead-white, making her lips even more red; her green eyes were furious and startled. No one had ever done a thing like that to her before.

Seconds went by, and more seconds. At last Peter Dane spoke:

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have done that. I couldn't help it. I owe you an apology. It was . . . it was the perfume—ylang-ylang."

The fury went out of her eyes, but her face stayed white.

"What's the perfume got to do with it?" she asked.

Peter Dane had turned as if to go, but now he turned back. The lines in his face had deepened, his manner was unwilling, ungracious.

"I suppose I owe you more than an apology," he said in a monotone, "an explanation. My wife used that perfume. She was the only one I'd ever known—"

There was rage in Dane's eyes. He put a hand against Antoinette's shoulder and sent her reeling backward.

"Your wife? You're married?"

He shook his head.

"Divorced?"

Peter Dane's face twitched once, then he snarled at her:

"Damn you! What the hell business is it of yours? She's dead."

Antoinette said nothing. She stood where she was for a while, then with swaying hips walked over to the dressing table and looked at herself in the mirror. Outwardly she was calm, but deep inside every emotion of which she was capable was in a tumult. Suddenly she spun around.

"The knife . . . the knife that Johnny gave you! I want it back."

The lines went out of Peter Dane's face. The eyes went blank; his face went stony.

"What knife?"

Peter Dane walked out.

V.

A week had gone by since Mordecai Breen had taken up his quarters at Dr. Park-Minton's house on West End Avenue. So far nothing had happened and Breen was getting restive. Seeing the same faces day in and day out was getting on his nerves. His original dislike for Dr. Cecil Park-Minton had, if anything, increased, and that, for no particular reason at all. To Le Bar, Breen was more or less indifferent. Le Bar wasn't a very decisive personality. He seemed to have few opinions of his own, moved in the shadow, as it were, of Park-Minton. Breen classified him as Park-Minton's stooge, and let it go at that.

Breen's duties were simple enough. If a strange patient came to call on either Park-Minton or Le Bar, Breen, clad in a white jacket, impersonating a male nurse, stood by. When Le Bar and Park-Minton went out to make their rounds, Breen accompanied them in the car. At night he made the rounds of the house, saw to it that all the doors were locked and that the ground-floor windows and shutters were properly closed. The whole thing was monotonous. Outside of Park-Minton and Le Bar, there were two other occupants of the house—a Japanese who combined the functions of cook, butler, and chauffeur, and a nurse who, considering that she was working for two surgeons, had the happy name of Miss Carver.

It was after dinner. Dr. Park-Minton, Breen, and Le Bar were sitting in Park-Minton's study. The conversation was sparse. Breen was bored, fretful. He had brought along a fair supply of liquor, but by now it was all gone. Le Bar took down a book from one of the shelves and began to read. Dr. Park-Minton adjusted the patch over his left eye, and with the other he looked at Breen.

"I imagine," he said in a soft voice, "that you seldom have had an easier, more congenial, or profitable job than this one."

"That's what you think," Breen said truculently. He got out of the chair in which he had been sprawling and paced the floor restlessly. He came to an abrupt halt. "Say, isn't there anything to drink in this house? Ring for the Jap. I want a drink."

Park-Minton's eye gleamed. He shook his head. "We never have any liquor in this house."

"What?" Breen was indignant. His face was nervous.

Le Bar looked up from his book, an odd expression on his narrow face.

"I want a drink," Breen insisted suddenly. "Send the Jap out. Tell him to get me a couple of bottles. I'll pay for it." He waited.

Neither of the others said anything, and then strangely enough it was Le Bar, who scarcely ever expressed an opinion of his own, who spoke:

"We—Dr. Park-Minton and I—would rather you didn't drink. We . . . we'd rather not have any spiritous liquors in this house."

Mordecai Breen glared at him in astonishment, then he looked at Park-Minton. The latter had a queer, brittle expression in his face. His sensitive mouth was set. Breen, who had one of the most violent tempers imaginable, let out something of a roar.

"Say, what the hell is it to you two whether or not I take a drink? I didn't come here to have my personal habits renovated. I'm here to look out for you two guys and that's what I'm doing. The whole idea is lousy. If you want to know what I think, I'll tell you. I think you're screwy. Nobody's going to do anything to you. This fellow Dane, if he was going to take a crack at you, would have done it before this."

He broke off abruptly, walked to one of the windows and stared out into the night, considering whether or not he ought to quit. He stood there for a long time seeing nothing. The avenue was dark and deserted. Suddenly he stiffened. Someone was across the street, moving to and fro in the shadows of the opposite buildings. It was a tall man who had a slender build. Breen couldn't be sure—the nearest lamp-post was some twenty feet away—but he got the impression that the man across the way was studying Park-Minton's house. Breen let the curtains fall back into place and turned slowly back to the others.

"This Dane," he said, making his voice soft, "would he be a tall, thin fellow?"

Dr. Park-Minton nodded. "What made you ask that?" he said.

"Because there's somebody like that across the street, someone who I think is casing—looking over this house."

Dr. Park-Minton sprang to his feet and darted to

the window. He pulled the curtains aside and looked out.

Breen let out an oath, went to the window, took hold of Park-Minton by the elbow and yanked him away.

"Are you nuts?" he growled. "Supposing that's Dane and he's got a gun, with you standing by the window making a target of yourself?" Breen's voice choked with exasperation.

Le Bar had risen. He was pressing his body against one of the bookcases. His face was white, frightened. The gray eyes looked with fear toward the window.

"He's right," he said to Park-Minton. "What . . . what are we going to do?"

Breen ignored him. To Park-Minton he said:

"Well, did you get a look at him?"

"Yes."

"Was it Dane?"

"I don't know," Park-Minton said. "It might be. It was too dark for me to be sure."

"Can't you tell from the way he walked, from the way he held himself, or something?"

Dr. Park-Minton shook his head. "I didn't know Peter Dane well enough to be able to identify him from things like that. I only saw him twice in my life."

Mordecai Breen dropped into a chair. He glowered at Park-Minton. When he spoke, his voice was tight and irritable, devoid of the patience he tried to put into it.

"I've been here a week," he said. "I've been trying to get some dope from you that would help, and you gave me nothing—nothing outside of what you told me in my office. And now you tell me that a guy who beat you up, maimed you, and is coming to kill you, only met you twice in his life. Is that reasonable?"

Park-Minton shrugged, unmoved by Breen's outburst. The latter, his face filled with disgust, rose, went back to the window, parted the curtains an inch or so and again peered out. The man across the street was still there, still facing Park-Minton's house. His head went up and down as though he were taking in the various floors one by one.

Suddenly there was the thin shriek of a police siren. A patrol car came up and stopped, with brakes screaming. Two policemen jumped out. They looked up and down the street, up at the buildings. One of them spoke to the thin man who had been watching Park-Minton's house. The thin man shook his head. The sound of another siren, clanging bells, and the next moment the street was filled with fire engines and auxiliary apparatus. The firemen sprang down, began running to and fro ringing doorbells, creating a scene of confusion.

Le Bar said nervously, "What is it? What's happening?"

Without turning, Breen said, "Fire somewhere. Here comes another police car."

Breen kept his yellow-brown eyes fixed on the street, not on the firemen or the police, but on the thin man. There was no fire. Had somebody turned in a false alarm—deliberately? Had someone purposely created all this confusion? Why? Was it just a trick to create a diversion so that this Peter Dane—if the man across the street *was* Peter Dane—could slip into Park-Minton's house? Was he hoping that one of the firemen would ring Park-Minton's bell, get the door open, and that he could then slip in, perhaps in the guise of a reporter, or something like that? Or was he hoping that Park-Minton and Le Bar would run out into the street to see what was happening, or at least open the windows and look out? All that was possible—but wrong.

The thin man detached himself from the small crowd that had gathered and walked away. Ten minutes later the fire engines departed. The police cars stayed a little longer, then they, too, left, and the street was quiet.

Mordecai Breen came away from the window. He glanced at Park-Minton. There was a weird look in Park-Minton's one eye. It was focused into space. His nostrils were quivering, his lips were working without making a sound. Then he looked at Mordecai Breen.

"It's all over," Breen said. "There was no fire."

"You don't suppose," Park-Minton said slowly, "that all that was prearranged to enable Dane—"

Breen shook his head vigorously. "I thought of that myself at first," he said, "but the guy who was watching the house walked away. I saw him go down the street as fast as he could, the minute the police car got here. When you come to think of it, if you're out to kill somebody, you don't fix it to get all the cops you can around, not to mention a lot of firemen that might get in your way. There's nothing to it. Say, you sure you haven't got something to drink in this place, something you dish out for medicinal purposes?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Park-Minton said. "But are *you* sure that the man we think might be Dane, walked away?"

"Of course I'm sure," Breen said fretfully.

Nurse Carver came in. Nurse Carver interested Breen. She was about forty, with prematurely white hair, and had one of the most placid faces that Breen had ever seen. She had a strong, vigorous body, and for a woman, extraordinarily large hands. For some inexplicable reason, whenever Breen saw Nurse Carver and Park-Minton together, he got the impression that Park-Minton disliked her. And what was even more strange, Breen had a distinct feeling that Nurse Carver knew that Park-Minton disliked her and enjoyed it. If he didn't like her, why hadn't he dismissed her? She had been with him for years, Park-Minton had said to Breen when he first got there.

"Will you want me any more tonight, doctor?" Nurse Carver said. Her voice was husky, deferential.

"Not tonight, Miss Carver," Park-Minton said in an abstract fashion.

Nurse Carver turned to go. Her eyes met Breen's.

"They tell me," Breen said, "that there's nothing to drink in this house. Maybe you got some."

Nurse Carver's eyes widened. Then: "No. There's nothing to drink in this house." She laughed softly, without moving a muscle in her face.

"Miss Carver!" Park-Minton's voice was sharp.

"Sorry, doctor," Nurse Carver said.

She turned her back on Breen and made for the door. That broad strong back of hers shook a little, as though she were still laughing silently.

VI.

Mordecai Breen, sound asleep, was dreaming. He was dreaming that he was playing with a huge great Dane. The big dog liked to play. It stood on its hind legs with its front paws on Breen's shoulders, letting Breen push it all around the room, pretending that it was trying to push Breen around. Breen had the dog up against the wall beside the door. The great Dane was wagging its tail, banging it against the door. It made a lot of noise, so much noise that Breen opened his eyes. The great Dane was still banging its tail against the door. Only there was no great Dane, and it dawned on Breen that there was really someone knocking from the outside. He sat bolt upright, fumbled for the switch, and even as he turned on the light, he heard a voice—Nurse Carver's voice.

"Mr. Breen! Mr. Breen!"

Breen, now wide awake, said, "Just a minute," snatched up an old dressing gown, put it on, and opened the door.

Nurse Carver said: "Dr. le Bar is dead. He's been murdered." Her face stayed placid; her voice was even, unexcited.

Mordecai Breen let out an oath. He glanced at the clock; it was after two. He said, "Show me."

Nurse Carver started to lead the way when Dr. Park-Minton came hurrying down the hall. He was a weird sight. His hair was disheveled like one roused from a sudden slumber. He wore a purple velvet lounging robe, but the weirdness came from the fact that he hadn't stopped to put on the black patch that covered his missing eye. The empty socket somehow was repulsive.

"What is it?" he said sharply. "What is all this noise?"

"She says," Breen snarled, "that Le Bar is dead—murdered."

Park-Minton stopped in his tracks as though he had been struck from behind.

"Dane!" he muttered. "I knew it. I knew something would happen. All that business out in the street, the fire engines—"

"Don't be a fool!" Breen roared. The roar was to cover his own confusion.

Park-Minton of course was right. And he, Breen, had been right when that same idea had first occurred to him. But Dane had put it over on him. To be sure, he had seen Dane go down the street; but Dane might have come back. Or Dane might have had a confederate. But even so, how had the confederate gotten in? How? The hell with it.

"Where's Le Bar's body?"

"In his room," Nurse Carver explained.

Breen knew where it was. He brushed past Nurse Carver and Park-Minton and dashed into Le Bar's room. The lights were on. Le Bar lay on the floor. A knife was buried in his breast.

Breen stepped across Le Bar's body, went over to the extension telephone on Le Bar's desk, picked it up and called police headquarters. He asked for Sergeant Hammerstein and got him.

"There's been a murder," Breen said, and gave Park-Minton's address.

Hammerstein said: "Why not? You never have a client unless there's a murder."

Breen said, "Go climb a tree," and hung up.

That he should have said, "Go climb a tree," in view of what occurred to him next, was a little ironical. One of the windows was open. A breeze was blowing the curtains back. Breen looked at the window. A small square had been cut out of the pane just below the catch, sufficiently large for a man to reach through and release the catch. Breen went to the window and looked out into the back yard. There was a tree right there—a tree big enough and close enough so that anyone who could have climbed it, could have reached the window and forced it. The square of glass lay on the floor. It had adhesive tape against it—tape that was used to hold it while it was being cut so that it wouldn't fall and awaken Le Bar.

Breen saw it all clearly now. Somebody had turned in a false alarm in order to create all that tremendous excitement in the street. And while that was going on, the murderer—the thin man whom Breen had seen going down the street—had made his way around to Riverside Drive. Here he had entered one of the houses, or perhaps it had been simpler—had found an alley that brought him into the back yard of one of the Drive houses. Then he had climbed a few fences until he found himself in Park-Minton's back yard. Now all he he had to do was to climb the tree. It was all so simple and he, Breen, was a dope.

Breen left the window the way it was. He turned back to Le Bar—Le Bar, lying on his back with the knife in his breast buried up to the handle. Blood stained Le Bar's green and yellow pajamas. That wasn't surprising. The surprising thing was that a lot of three-by-five filing cards and the wooden box

that had held them lay scattered all over the floor.

Some of the cards were in Le Bar's outstretched hand!

Breen knelt down to look at the cards. They were typewritten, recording the case histories, apparently, of Le Bar's patients. Only about a dozen or so cards were in Le Bar's hand. That didn't make sense. Was Le Bar stabbed while he was going over the case histories of his patients at that hour of the night? Or did the murderer have some peculiar interest in those case histories? Had the killer scattered the cards about? No, that didn't make sense, either. If it had been the murderer, there wouldn't be any cards in Le Bar's hand. Had Le Bar grabbed the cards after he had been stabbed? That wasn't likely. If he had had time enough to do that, he would have had time enough to cry out for help. That made Breen think of something.

His yellow-brown eyes sultry, he said to Nurse Carver: "How'd you come to find him? What made you look in his room?"

Nurse Carver's face stayed placid. She betrayed no embarrassment.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I suffer from insomnia. I wanted Dr. le Bar to give me some sleeping tablets. I've often done that—knocked on his door late at night, and asked him for them. He doesn't mind. I tried to sleep tonight. I tried not to wake him, especially as it was almost two o'clock, and finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I came and knocked on his door. Dr. le Bar is a light sleeper. I know. I've awakened him many a time. I knocked tonight and got no response. I knocked loudly again and again, and then— Well, I don't know, call it woman's intuition if you want to, even though there is no such thing. I became frightened; perhaps it's because you're here, a private detective. It is a strange thing to have happen in a house. Anyway, I became frightened, opened the door and turned on the light, and there . . . and there he was."

Mordecai Breen looked at her moodily, then shifted his eyes to Park-Minton.

"Now I hope you're satisfied," Park-Minton said. "Until now you've been thinking that I was slightly out of my mind—a little cowardly perhaps—that Le Bar and I stood in no danger whatsoever. Tonight I tried to suggest to you that those fire engines and the police, when there was no fire—"

"All right, all right," Mordecai Breen said.

His face was nervous, his mouth wolfish, and his words fretful. Maybe it was his fault. His eyes faded away and came to rest on the dead man on the floor, on the blood on his green and yellow pajamas. Mordecai Breen knelt down and looked at the cards that were scattered over the floor and the few that were in Le Bar's hand. They told him nothing except that each card bore a number, besides the history of Le Bar's or Park-Minton's patients. To Nurse Carver he said:

"What do these mean?"

Nurse Carver's face stayed immobile. Her eyes, that were something between blue and gray, remained inscrutable.

"They're just records," she said. "He kept his records here in this room. It's obvious what they are, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Mordecai Breen said. "It's obvious what they are, but why they should be all over the floor and some of them in his hand after he's dead, isn't so obvious."

Nurse Carver shrugged her broad, capable shoulders, and said nothing.

Ten minutes later Hammerstein arrived. Hammerstein, short, stocky, with an aggressive expression, brought plain-clothes men with him, fingerprint men, camera experts, and a little man with a bag, who turned out to be an assistant medical examiner. The sergeant, surveying the scene, said:

"Don't you ever have any clients that live? What is all this? How do you come to be here? If I hadn't been working late, you wouldn't have gotten me."

"I never have any luck," Breen said.

"I suppose that's meant to be a dirty crack," Hammerstein said. "Open up. What's it all about?"

Mordecai Breen shrugged and with his chin indicated Dr. Park-Minton.

Park-Minton explained. He told Hammerstein about Peter Dane, about his employing Breen as his bodyguard, about the fire engines and the police cars. He explained it all about as vaguely as he had explained it originally to Mordecai Breen.

Sergeant Hammerstein listened skeptically, watching in the meanwhile his men examining fingerprints, looking at the window, watching the medical examiner, then:

"Why should this Dane want to kill you or your assistant, Le Bar?" he demanded brusquely.

Dr. Park-Minton's answer was a long time in coming. It was easy enough to parry the questions of a private detective whom you're hiring at a high rate, but not so easy when it came to evading an ordinary policeman. At last Park-Minton said:

"This Dane is out of his mind. As a doctor, I understand the symptoms perfectly. Dane suffers under the delusion that Le Bar and I injured him; don't ask me how, I don't know." He pointed with his finger at the empty socket. "Dane assaulted me and this is what happened. They sent him to prison, of course, which only added to his—" Park-Minton broke off with a shrug.

"Yeah. I knowed about that," Hammerstein said. Then to the medical examiner: "How long has he been dead?"

"Not more than an hour or so. Rigor mortis hasn't set in," the little doctor said. "Can't tell exactly."

Nurse Carver said, indicating the cards on the

floor: "Can I gather these up? They're the records of our patients."

"Sure," Hammerstein said. "Why not?"

Nurse Carver started to pick up the cards, then stopped.

"I suppose the ones he's got in his hand, you'll want to keep."

Hammerstein eyed her dully. "I don't see why—" he started.

Breen said: "Yes. The ones in his hand we'll want to keep."

The sergeant glowered at him. "Say, who's running this?"

Breen paid no attention to him. To Nurse Carver and Park-Minton, he said:

"We won't need you any more. The sergeant and I have got some things we want to discuss."

For a moment it looked as though Park-Minton were going to argue the matter, but then he moved his shoulders and walked out. Nurse Carver stayed for a few seconds longer. She looked at the sergeant, then at Mordecai Breen, then she followed Dr. Park-Minton.

"You act as though you knew something," Hammerstein said, "but then you always act that way. That's to make your clients think you're a detective instead of a punk newspaper reporter."

Breen said: "Look at the bed."

"All right," Hammerstein said. "I'm looking at the bed. There's a little blood there. That means he was stabbed while he was in bed. He wasn't killed instantly. He got up, staggered around the room in the dark, knocked over the file box with the cards. Don't ask me why. How the hell do I know why? Don't ask me why he grabbed a fistful of the cards. I don't know that, either, but I suppose you do."

Mordecai Breen shook his head. "He was stabbed in bed all right, and he was bleeding, and you say he got out of bed and staggered around. Now look at the blood on his pajamas. If he stood up, why didn't the blood run *down* toward his feet? Why did it run *up* toward his chin?"

The assistant medical examiner made a chuckling sound. "That's an interesting idea."

Two of the plain-clothes men stopped their work and looked at Breen.

Hammerstein glowered. "Anything to make it harder," he growled. "Keep on thinking of some more things."

Breen said: "Not me. I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Believe it or not, there isn't a drink in this lousy joint."

VII.

There was no regular time for breakfast at Tessie Bonville's boardinghouse. You had your breakfast whenever you felt like it. Antoinette generally had hers in her room along with the morning paper. Munching a piece of toast, she scanned the front page. The toast slipped from her fingers, her eyes widened, her breath came faster. There it was right on the front page!

It naturally would be on the front page. The murder of as famous a surgeon as Dr. le Bar was news. It would have been news even if he'd only been just the assistant of an even more famous surgeon—Park-Minton.

Little Limehouse Johnny hadn't failed her!

Antoinette had acted with promptness and decision. Two days before, she had gotten in touch with Tessie's lawyer, had asked him to look up Peter Dane's case and how he had come to be sent to prison. Tessie's lawyer had had little difficulty in finding that out. In addition to Park-Minton, the other principal witness against Peter Dane had been Le Bar. Antoinette had reasoned rightly then, that the two men Dane wanted to kill were Park-Minton and Le Bar. Of course she might be wrong. It might be only Park-Minton and someone else. Or it might be neither Park-Minton nor Le Bar. There might be two other men. But then something had happened last night that had satisfied her that she was right.

Shortly after dinner Peter Dane had gone out. Limehouse Johnny had told Antoinette about that instantly, and just as instantly Antoinette had made up her mind. She had sent Limehouse Johnny to Park-Minton's house. Dane had a head start, but he had no money and would have to walk. At best it would take him twenty minutes, whereas Johnny, in a taxi, could be there in five. Johnny was the first to arrive and from a safe distance he saw Dane standing there looking up at Park-Minton's house, just as Mordecai Breen had seen him from the inside. And Johnny, from a drugstore on Broadway, phoned Antoinette. Antoinette already had decided what to do in case Dane made his appearance at Park-Minton's house. She, too, went to a drugstore to make a telephone call, to make sure that the call wouldn't be traced back to Tessie's rooming house. Then she went home and waited.

Peter Dane had no key. When he returned, he rang and, as per instructions, the Negress reported his arrival to Antoinette. Antoinette had met Dane as he was going upstairs to his room.

"Where have you been?"

"Just for a walk," Dane had said shortly. Then he went past her on to his room.

Antoinette made no attempt to stop him. She was satisfied. She would have been even more satisfied had she realized last night how swiftly, how determinedly little Limehouse Johnny had acted. It was here in the paper. Le Bar was dead, stabbed. Johnny would take care of Park-Minton next, and then . . . then Dane would be himself again. Something could be done with him once that insane idea was out of his mind.

Antoinette left her breakfast unfinished. She gathered her soft pale-green negligee more tightly

about herself and went downstairs to the dining room. Harry the Ox was there and so was Peter Dane. Peter Dane didn't look up as she came in, but Harry the Ox did.

"Good morning," Harry the Ox said. "Nice to think of you coming down and having breakfast with me. I don't remember that happening before." There was a touch of sarcasm in Harry the Ox's voice. He took his opaque eyes from Antoinette and let them rest on Peter Dane. His eyes were unfriendly, his big mouth was askew.

"If you've finished your breakfast," Antoinette said, "I'd like to talk to Dane—alone."

Harry the Ox put the napkin to his mouth, then flung it on the table. His face was dark, scowling; then he got up.

"I know when I'm not wanted," he said.

"That's funny," Antoinette said carelessly. "You never knew before."

Harry the Ox made a growling sound deep down in his chest and walked out.

Antoinette sat down next to Dane. She had brought the newspaper along and now put it down beside him. Dane looked up from his plate at Antoinette, without interest. She pointed to the account of the murder of Le Bar. Peter Dane didn't comprehend.

"Read it," she said, with a trace of impatience.

Dane read. His sparse frame grew taut. His gaunt face became stony. The account was brief enough. The police had given out no details. There was no mention of the filing cards containing the case histories of Le Bar's patients. There was no mention of the blood that had run up instead of down. It did state, of course, that Le Bar had been stabbed, but there was no description of the knife, and the account wound up with the usual statement that the police had several important clues. That was all.

Peter Dane glanced briefly at Antoinette, then turned to his coffee.

Antoinette said, "You don't seem pleased."

Dane put down his coffee. His words clipped, his voice terse, he said:

"Why should I be?"

"You're hard to please," Antoinette said. She made her voice gentle, almost pleading. "He was one of the two you wanted to kill, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but not the important one."

Antoinette smiled. "Don't worry. Park-Minton will be the next. I'll see to that just . . . just as I saw to this one."

Peter Dane's hand was still on his coffee cup. The cup rattled in the saucer. He stared at her. There was disbelief in his eyes, then something else came into them—a look that frightened her.

"*You* saw to it?" he said sharply. "You . . . you had him killed?"

"Yes," she said, without elation. Somehow she had pictured this thing differently. She had visualized this moment as a proud one, with Dane grateful. "I wanted to save you," she said. "You couldn't have killed him without being caught. You can't kill Park-Minton without getting caught."

After a long time Dane, his voice filled with bitterness, said: "Not now, I can't." He stood up and looked down at her. His face darkened by degrees, his eyes filled with uncontrollable rage. "Just because I'm staying here, living under your and your mother's roof, eating your food, that doesn't give you a right to interfere with my life. Who asked you to save me? Who told you that I wanted to be saved? And now it's going to be ten times as hard. Park-Minton will be on his guard. The police will be protecting him. I won't be able to get near him. Damn you!"

"Don't," she said. Her face was white. "I promise you he'll die just as Le Bar died. I promise," she repeated earnestly.

The anger went out of him. His tall form sagged and again he looked uncomprehending.

"Why," he said, "should you want to do this for me?"

Antoinette looked away. "I told you," she said softly. "I wanted to save you from yourself, and"—she didn't blush; now she looked him straight in the eyes—"for me."

Peter Dane shook his head as though to clear a befogged mind.

"You and I could do great things together," Antoinette said with gentle insistence. "Once you were satisfied, peaceful, loved, what a man you could be! I don't know what it's all about. You won't tell me. I only know that it's something that is eating your insides away, that you want to see two men dead. Well—" She made a gesture with her slim hand.

Peter Dane licked his dry lips. He tried to sound reasonable, to keep his voice from being strident.

"I suppose I ought to thank you," he said, "but let me make something clear to you. I don't know how you found it out or guessed at it, but you're right. I want to see Park-Minton dead. But I don't want anybody else to kill him." His voice rose. *"I want to kill him!* I want to kill him with my own hands . . . *and with a knife!"*

Slowly Antoinette got to her feet. The brilliant green eyes were uncertain.

"You're crazy," she breathed. "You're crazy and you're driving me crazy. I don't know what I see in you, but—" Idly she picked up the napkin that Harry the Ox had thrown down. She twisted it and tore at it as if trying to rend it into shreds. Then she let it slip to the floor. "You mean . . . you mean you can't be happy unless you—"

"That's what I mean. I want to kill him myself. I want to talk to him before he dies, to remind him— All right, I'm crazy. A man can be crazy, can't he, if he wants to? Being in prison— No,

that's not it. I went crazy before they put me in jail."

For a long time Antoinette stood very still without saying a word. Then a sudden change came over her. Every trace of indecision left her. She became her old self, strong, sure—the Antoinette who could hold at bay without an effort the half dozen or so ex-convicts who surrounded her, who stood ready to devour her at the slightest sign of weakness. She walked close to Peter Dane, her hips swaying, her hands making tiny gestures.

"If you could have your way," she said, "if you could kill Park-Minton, would you be happy then? Would you—"

Peter Dane looked at her dully. "What do you mean?"

A slow smile came to Antoinette's lips. "Give me two days," she said, "three, and I'll bring you Park-Minton—alive. I'll bring him to you on a platter!"

She patted Peter Dane on the shoulder in a comforting way, like a mother telling her son to go and play, that everything would be all right. Then she walked out.

Peter Dane watched her go. He had a strange sense of unreality. But then he had that for a long time—more than two years.

Antoinette went into the game room. Harry the Ox was playing pool with Halverson. Baron Lush sat at the card table playing solitaire. No one else was there.

Antoinette beckoned to the baron. Carefully he placed the queen of diamonds on the king of spades and added the jack of clubs. After that he rose and came over to the pool table. Harry the Ox put down his cue. He looked at Antoinette. Halverson put down his cue and looked away.

"I want you boys to do something for me," Antoinette said.

Halverson turned his blond head and took in Antoinette with his cobalt-blue eyes. Harry the Ox, his mouth sullen, said:

"Why come to me? If you want anything done, why don't you ask this new guy, this Dane? You like him."

Antoinette slipped her arm through Harry the Ox's arm. Her fingers played on his wrist. She looked at him sideways through her long, curling lashes. Harry the Ox's huge frame quivered.

"I was only kidding, Antoinette," Harry the Ox said. "What do you want?"

To Baron Lush, Antoinette said: "I want you to rent a house—a furnished house—under some name, any name. But not a place like this. It's got to be a place with class. It's got to be in a swell neighborhood. Pay whatever you have to, a month's rent down, or two months. We won't need it more than a couple of days. You oughtn't to have any trouble. You look the part."

"What do you want me to do?" Harry the Ox broke in, frowning. It seemed to him that the baron was getting the preference and he didn't like it.

Antoinette gave his arm a little squeeze.

"Harry, you and Halverson will have plenty to do," she said softly. "As soon as the baron gets the house, we'll talk it over." She let go of Harry the Ox, looked at each one of them in turn with her green eyes brilliant, promising, and made for the door, walking in that peculiar swaying, provocative way of hers. At the door she paused, turned and smiled. "I like men," she said, "who do things—men that you can count on."

Harry the Ox, his mouth slack, watched her slip through the door. Halverson looked at Harry the Ox. Baron Lush was studying his perfectly manicured fingernails.

Outside, Antoinette ran into Limehouse Johnny. Her expression changed. She wasn't acting now. She said:

"Thanks, Johnny, for last night."

"I called you right away—" Johnny said.

"I know, and thanks for the rest. Don't tell me about it, I don't want to know. I didn't know you were going to do it or I would have waited up for you. I think you've got more guts than all the rest of them put together."

Limehouse Johnny blushed. "I don't . . . I don't—" he stammered.

"It's in the papers," Antoinette said, "but don't tell Dane about your having any part in it. He doesn't think it was a very good idea. And, Johnny, don't do anything else. Dane says he's got to kill Park-Minton himself. You understand, Johnny? He's got to do it himself."

Limehouse Johnny looked puzzled. He didn't understand, at least not all of it. He was sure of one thing, though. She liked Dane and that made it all right with him, Limehouse Johnny. He liked Dane, too.

VIII.

Sergeant Hammerstein, looking gloomy, said: "Are you going to live here for the rest of your life? It'll be soft so long as nothing happens to this Park-Minton, but after that you'll have to go back sleeping in the park. This case is making a big stir in the newspapers. Park-Minton is a big shot and so was Le Bar, and the papers don't like it because we cops don't give 'em any dope. We don't give 'em any dope because we haven't got any."

Mordecai Breen, restive, said: "I'm getting out of here at the end of the week. Park-Minton says he won't need me any more. He doesn't think much of me anyhow because Le Bar got killed. It's all right with me. The guy won't let me have any liquor. I had to phone Slap-happy the day before yesterday to come and smuggle in a few bottles. Want a drink?"

Hammerstein shook his head. Three days had

elapsed since the murder of Le Bar and he hadn't turned up a thing, had found no trace of Peter Dane; and such evidence as the police had, meant really nothing—the small square of glass cut out of the window; the cards in Le Bar's hand; the knife.

"What about fingerprints?" Mordecai Breen asked.

"Oh, sure," Hammerstein growled. "Every amateur dick figures all you have to have is some fingerprints, and the case is in the bag. Sure there were fingerprints. There were fingerprints on them cards. They were Le Bar's and that Carver woman's. Why wouldn't they be on the cards? They both handled 'em enough. She made 'em out and he studied 'em."

"What about the knife?"

Again Hammerstein shook his head. "No fingerprints on the knife. The guy must have worn gloves. And there were no fingerprints on that little piece of glass. Say, what'd you do with that, anyway? I've got to have that back. That's evidence."

Breen opened the top drawer of his bureau, took out the piece of glass—the tape was still on it—and gave it to Hammerstein without saying anything.

The sergeant looked into Breen's yellow-brown eyes and a startled expression came over his face.

"You know something," he declared threateningly. "You're holding out on me. If you are, I'll take you down to the station house and have you resisting arrest until there won't be enough left of you to bury. See?"

Mordecai Breen gave a fretful shrug. "When I know something, I'll tell you. Right now I'm guessing. It's the cards that bother me. They don't fit into the picture."

"Forget about the cards," Hammerstein said impatiently. "You're always harping on them. They don't mean a thing. They just happened. Le Bar had 'em in his hand when he was stabbed, maybe. Maybe he fell asleep while he was studying them, and the murderer knocked over the file box and dumped the rest of them by accident."

Mordecai Breen went back to the bureau, took out a bottle of whiskey and poured himself a liberal drink.

"I suppose," he said, "the blood on the pajamas was an accident, too—the blood that didn't run down while Le Bar was staggering around, that crawled up toward his chin. Does your conscience ever trouble you when you take your pay check?"

Hammerstein said, "Go to hell," and walked out.

Half an hour later Nurse Carver knocked on Breen's door.

"Dr. Park-Minton wants you to come down to the office. There's a patient waiting to see him—somebody he never heard of. The doctor wants you to put on your white coat."

Nurse Carver started to go out, then changed her mind.

"I saw that policeman who is in charge of this case just go out. Have they . . . have the police found out anything yet? We ought to have those cards back. They're part of our records. If they mean anything to the police, they could make copies of them." Nurse Carver's face was as placid as always.

Mordecai Breen's eyes went flat. "You wouldn't know, would you," he said casually, "if there was anything special about the cards, anything different about the ones in Le Bar's hand from the ones scattered all over the floor?"

Nurse Carver shook her head. "The cards are all the same, except of course that the names of the patients and their ailments differ. They're just cards and they're numbered. The numbers are for cross-reference. Say, for instance, we take an X ray. When I file away the picture, I put the number on the picture that corresponds with the number of the patient's case history as recorded on the card."

Breen took off his coat, slipped into a white linen jacket, and followed Nurse Carver downstairs. On his way to Park-Minton's office Breen went through the waiting room. He saw a very tall, broad-shouldered man sitting there, with soft brown eyes and a wide, gentle mouth—rather a distinguished-looking individual. It was Baron Lush, but he wasn't there under that name. To Nurse Carver he had given the name of Roland. Breen went on into Park-Minton's office.

"Please sit over there," Park-Minton said, "and pretend you are studying something through that microscope. I haven't the faintest idea who this Roland is. From Carver's description, he certainly isn't Dane, but then it might be a friend of Dane's. After what's happened to Le Bar—" With a movement of his shoulders, Dr. Park-Minton broke off. He didn't appear to be particularly worried. He pressed the buzzer.

Nurse Carver appeared and Park-Minton told her to show in the new patient.

Baron Lush was very good. Aside from the fact that he had the natural appearance of a very prosperous, substantial citizen, he was an excellent actor. He was particularly good in playing the part of a husband, though right now he was to be a different sort of husband from the one he generally impersonated whenever Tessie Bonville found some likely victim for the badger game. As Mr. Roland, Baron Lush wasn't the irate husband. He was sorrowful, worried, frightened as to what might happen to his dear wife who was so very ill.

"Our family physician," he told Park-Minton, "thinks she has to be operated on immediately. He suggested you as the best man I could get. I'm a well-to-do man, Dr. Park-Minton," Baron Lush said with becoming modesty. "Any fee—"

"Who is your family physician?" Dr. Park-Minton asked.

"Dr. Wohl. I don't think you'd know him," Baron Lush said. "You see, we come from Washington. The old gentleman has been taking care of my family—the Rolands—for many years. I had him come down here by plane the minute my wife, Mrs. Roland, had her first attack."

"Well, we'll see what we can do," Dr. Park-Minton said in his most reassuring, professional manner. "Perhaps the matter isn't so serious—" Park-Minton checked himself. There was no point in minimizing the case in advance. This Roland looked like a very affluent person, and would unquestionably be willing to pay almost any fee, if it could be made to appear that it was a very serious matter indeed. And the chances were that his family doctor didn't know what it was all about.

"I'm afraid it's very serious," Baron Lush said gravely. "In fact, it is so serious, Dr. Wohl wouldn't discuss the case with me at all. He says he prefers to have your opinion first."

"Humph," said Park-Minton. "Perhaps I'd better telephone your physician."

"I wonder," said Baron Lush. "I know that this is making an unusual demand on you. But I'm out of my mind with worry. My car and chauffeur are downstairs. I wonder if you could come right over. Perhaps she ought to be moved to a hospital at once. Dr. Wohl is with her. She's in great pain. I know, of course, that money doesn't interest professional men of your standing. I just—you'll excuse me for bringing it up—I just want to say that any amount—"

Right here Baron Lush was at his best, the picture of a strong man about to break down.

Park-Minton's eyes filled with sudden suspicion. He looked at Mordecai Breen. The latter for the moment had taken his eye away from the microscope.

"What do you think, Breen?" Park-Minton said. "This is my assistant, Dr. Breen—Mr. Roland."

"If it's not too far," Breen said. "Remember you have an appendectomy at three o'clock. That leaves us an hour, doctor." Breen was bored by what was going on. His mind was on something else. Besides, why should Park-Minton be scared of this guy Roland?

Park-Minton turned inquiringly to Baron Lush.

"It's just east of Fifth Avenue," Baron Lush said. "We can be there in ten minutes, and then of course after that my car and chauffeur are at your disposal." Again Baron Lush was very good. There was just the right amount of pleading in his voice.

"All right," Park-Minton said briskly. "Get ready, Dr. Breen. I'll want you to come along. In case Mrs. Roland will have to be moved to the hospital, you'll have to make the arrangements."

Breen left the room, went upstairs, and changed his coat. He picked up his hat and overcoat, then took a flat blue-black automatic out of the drawer of the little writing table and slipped it into his pocket. He felt silly doing that. This was nothing but an ordinary case. In fact, the whole business was screwy.

Breen went back downstairs. "Mr. Roland" was in the hall, pacing the floor with well-simulated nervousness. Breen went into the waiting room on his way to Park-Minton's office. He met Nurse Carver coming out.

The color in her ordinarily placid face was higher than usual. There was an odd light in her eyes. She had an oblong slip of paper folded in the middle in her hand. To Breen, it looked like a check, but he couldn't be sure. She passed him without a word.

Breen waited a few seconds for Park-Minton to come out. Then he knocked on the door and walked in. Park-Minton was sitting at his desk, staring into space. Park-Minton's face was deathly pale. It was distorted with rage, and that one dark eye of his was ablaze with hate. He seemed to be unaware of Mordecai Breen's presence. Pensively, Breen rubbed a palm across his mouth, then:

"Your patient's waiting."

Park-Minton started.

"Yes, of course," he said. He pushed the partly open middle drawer of his desk shut, rose, took his hat and coat, and followed Breen.

The limousine parked in front of Dr. Park-Minton's house was impressive, and so was the chauffeur—one of the inmates of Tessie Bonville's ménage—Gimpy Myer. Right now Gimpy Myer was attired in a smart whipcord uniform. He wore a smart cap and puttees and stood holding the door.

Baron Lush waited for Park-Minton and Breen to get in. Park-Minton got in. Breen, one foot on the running board, hesitated. His yellow-brown eyes gleamed like a jungle cat's.

"Just a second," he said, "I forgot something." He winked at Park-Minton and patted his pocket as if to indicate he had forgotten his gun.

Park-Minton's shoulders twitched slightly, but he said nothing.

Breen dashed back up the steps and rang the bell. The little Japanese servant opened the door. Breen brushed past him through the waiting room straight into Park-Minton's office. He yanked open the center drawer of Park-Minton's desk and found what he thought he would find—a check book. He opened it to the last entry—a check for three thousand dollars made out to Elsie Carver!

Mordecai Breen sucked in his breath softly. He glanced at the balance. After deducting the check made out to Nurse Carver, Dr. Cecil Park-Minton had just one hundred and sixty-seven dollars and forty cents in the bank. Breen, the lines in his face angular, his brow furrowed with thought, was about to put the check book back when he heard a voice.

"Pardon, please." It was the little Japanese stand-

ing in the doorway. His tone was guttural. His little black eyes were solemn, reproving. "So sorry, but will have to tell honorable doctor that Mr. Breen is detecting by examining honorable doctor's private papers. Very sorry."

Without taking his eyes off the Japanese, Breen replaced the check book in the drawer and closed it. His mind was working furiously, grappling with this and that. He stood up slowly.

"I think you ought to," he said. "I think we'll both tell him."

The Japanese's eyes widened for a second, then grew wary. By that time Breen was beside him. Breen's hard fist shot out. It caught the Japanese on the jaw. The little yellow-skinned man went down and lay there still, his eyes closed.

Breen, his mouth wolfish, said: "So sorry. Pardon, please," and walked out to the car.

IX.

The limousine went east through Central Park, headed south, then turned left, off Fifth Avenue. Breen, preoccupied, didn't notice the street. It didn't matter. The house in front of which the car came to a stop was large and imposing.

Baron Lush led the way up the broad steps. A heavy mahogany door swung open. A massive figure in a butler's livery stood there—Harry the Ox.

"This way, please," Baron Lush said.

He conducted them up heavily carpeted stairs to the next floor and into a dimly lighted room. The blinds were closed. A single lamp on a small table gave what illumination there was. Breen and Park-Minton found themselves in a large bedroom with two doors besides the one through which they had entered. The girl in bed lay there with her eyes shut, her red hair against the white pillow lustrous, despite the dim light. She wore a pale-green marabou bed jacket, with elbow-length sleeves.

"She is sleeping," Baron Lush said in a hushed tone. "Perhaps Dr. Wohl has given her a sedative."

"Where is Dr. Wohl?" Park-Minton asked.

"He may be in my study," Baron Lush said. "I'll go and see." He went out.

Mordecai Breen took in the room without much interest. His mind was back in Park-Minton's house, considering Park-Minton's check book. He took in the girl in bed and felt sorry that she was ill. Mordecai Breen had an eye for women and this one had a lovely face; that luxurious red hair of hers was magnificent. The arms resting on the silken quilt were well shaped, smooth and white.

Park-Minton went over to the bed. He took hold of the girl's wrist and felt her pulse. She let out a soft moan.

"Open the shutters," Park-Minton said, "and let some light into this place."

Breen, his eyes on Park-Minton's hand holding the girl's wrist, said: "That's a magnificent ring, doctor; one of the best I've seen."

Park-Minton jerked his head around to look at Breen stonily. Breen went to one of the windows, tried to open the blinds and couldn't. He went to the other and couldn't open the blinds there, either.

"They're stuck," he said, "or something." He went to the switch, pressed it, and lighted the side brackets, flooding the room with light.

Just then Baron Lush came back. He wasn't alone. The big butler was with him. One of the other doors opened and the chauffeur came in. The chauffeur had a long-barreled revolver in his hand.

Mordecai Breen let out an oath. His hand darted toward his pocket where his own gun nestled. Somebody said:

"Don't do that, buddy."

Breen's eyes darted to the left where Mr. Roland—Baron Lush—stood, with the butler beside him. The butler, too, had a gun, much like Breen's own—a short, ugly-looking automatic. It was pointing straight at Breen. Breen's hand dropped away from his pocket. What the hell was going on here? This shouldn't be happening. Was he all wrong?

Park-Minton whirled.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. His voice was cracked. He kept jerking his head from side to side so as to be able to take them all in with his one eye.

Then from behind the chauffeur a short man appeared—a little man with scraggly hair and nondescript eyes. He had two coils of stout rope slung over his arm.

The butler, Harry the Ox, said: "Frisk 'em, Johnny."

Johnny walked behind Breen, patted his pockets, reached into the one that held the gun and took it out. For one wild moment Breen had the idea of spinning and grabbing the little man and holding him in front of himself as a shield, but that would be no good. They'd shoot him in the back before he could do anything. Besides, he didn't get it. The whole thing was unreal—the three men standing there grimly silent, and the little man with the rope, and the girl in bed. The girl had opened her eyes now. Her eyes were green. The little man left Breen and stepped behind Park-Minton. He searched him for weapons and found none. For a moment there was a weird stillness.

Breen said: "What's the play?"

Harry the Ox said: "Shut your trap. Sit down over there."

Breen sat down in an armchair that was too small for him.

"And you," Harry the Ox said, motioning with his gun to Park-Minton, "sit there."

"I want to know what the meaning of this outrageous affair is!" Park-Minton said, addressing himself to Baron Lush. Park-Minton's voice was

unsteady. He got no answer and sat down.

The girl in the bed still lay back with her red hair on the pillow. She was smiling now, looking up at the ceiling dreamily.

Without haste, Limehouse Johnny made his way to the back of Park-Minton's chair. He threw a piece of the rope across Park-Minton's chest, looped an end around each arm, then knotted the rope securely at the back of the chair. He did the same to Breen. Breen sat very still. There wasn't anything else to do. When they were both fettered, Harry the Ox turned toward the bed.

"What's next, Antoinette?"

Antoinette sat up. She stretched her arms—a luxurious, feline gesture. Then she threw back the covers and got out of bed.

Harry the Ox, eying her with slightly bloodshot eyes, taking in the feathery marabou jacket over the tight-fitting nightgown, said: "That's a nice rig you got on, Antoinette." He licked his lips.

Antoinette laughed softly without looking at him. Walking with that swaying, tantalizing gait of hers, she went up to Breen, studying him curiously.

"Who is this?" she asked over her shoulder. "What'd you bring him for?"

The baron said: "It's Park-Minton's assistant. Park-Minton wanted him along."

Mordecai Breen grinned up at Antoinette without mirth. His yellow-brown eyes were mocking but hot. "If you didn't have so many friends, kid, and I wasn't tied up, you and I could go places," he said.

Antoinette's eyes filled with disdain.

"You're going places—only you won't like it." She turned her back on him. "Where's Halverson?" she asked Harry the Ox.

"Downstairs keeping watch. We thought the owner might come to see if everything was all right; that he might have a key."

Antoinette nodded, then: "You can go back to the house, all of you, and take Halverson with you. Johnny can stay."

Harry the Ox looked sullen and obstinate. Again those hungry eyes of his took in Antoinette's costume from head to foot.

"Send Johnny home," he said. "I'll stay here and look out for you. One of those birds might get loose and you'll need a big guy."

From behind Antoinette came Breen's voice, taunting.

"If I get loose, you'll need *two* big guys."

Antoinette turned her head to look at him, then swung her body around and walked up to him. She slapped him hard across the mouth twice, without anger, almost with indifference, then went back to where Harry the Ox stood beside the baron.

"Out," she said, "all of you except Limehouse Johnny. Take the car with you."

It looked as though Harry the Ox was again disposed to argue the matter, but then he changed his mind. Scowling, he motioned Gimpy Myer to follow him and the baron. They left, with the baron closing the door softly behind him.

For eternal seconds, in a stillness that threatened to become unbearable, Antoinette stood looking at Park-Minton. Then to Limehouse Johnny she said:

"Tell him to come in."

Limehouse Johnny went out.

"I really don't understand it," Park-Minton said. "There must be some mistake—"

Antoinette said nothing. She went and sat on the edge of the bed, swinging her slim legs underneath the nightdress.

Mordecai Breen watched her. His lips a little swollen from the blows she had struck him, made his mouth more wolfish.

Limehouse Johnny came back. Behind him there was a tall, rather thin man with a lean face, and eyes that were fixed—fixed on Park-Minton. With slow, measured steps he walked past Limehouse Johnny and stood in the center of the room. There was a long carving knife in his hand.

Antoinette, her voice high, excited, said: "I kept my promise. I've brought him to you—on a platter. Go to work on him."

"Peter Dane!" Park-Minton's voice was strangled. His one eye threatened to pop out of its socket as it took in the knife in Peter Dane's hand.

"I said I'd come back," Peter Dane said in a voice that seemed miles away. He seemed unaware of Mordecai Breen's presence, of Johnny's presence, even of Antoinette's. His rigid eyes stayed riveted on Park-Minton.

Park-Minton ran his tongue across his parched lips.

"You're mad," he said; "stark, raving mad. What do you intend to do with . . . with that knife?"

"I think I am mad," Peter Dane said. There was something devastating about the dull flatness of his voice. "I have been waiting a long time for this moment—over two years." He stopped as though reviewing the past.

Mordecai Breen strained with his arms and found the rope wouldn't give a fraction of an inch. His throat was dry. His face twitched nervously.

"What did he do to you?" he said hoarsely.

Peter Dane blinked his eyes once, only now aware of Mordecai Breen's presence.

"Who are you?" he asked dully. "How did you get here?"

"I'm a private detective," Breen said, "hired by Park-Minton to protect him from you. It doesn't look as though I'd done a good job."

"You wouldn't want to protect him," Dane said with weary listlessness, "if you knew—"

"What did he do to you?" Breen repeated.

Without raising his voice, Dane said: "He murdered my wife—he and that assistant of his, Le Bar. She had to have an operation. It wasn't a very serious one." For a moment his voice broke, then he

went on in that same deadly monotone. "But I wanted the best I could get for her, even though it took every cent I had. I got Park-Minton and Le Bar. They operated on her . . . they operated on her, but they were drunk . . . so drunk they didn't know what they were doing, and they killed her . . . murdered her . . . just as I am going to murder him right now . . . with a knife."

"You're crazy," Park-Minton croaked, "crazy."

Peter Dane, talking off into space, said: "I wasn't there, of course—not in the operating room. It was the nurse, his private nurse, who told me days afterward. Her name was Carver, I think. There were a couple of other nurses there, I believe, but either they didn't realize or else they were afraid to say anything. Nurses are always afraid of doctors, especially doctors with a reputation like those two had."

"What did the Carver woman tell you?"

For a second Peter Dane looked confused. Then he shrugged. "I don't know. What difference does it make?"

Antoinette jumped off the bed. She came and stood beside Peter Dane. The flames in her green eyes flared high. Her lips were drawn back from her even, white teeth. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Go ahead," she said breathlessly, "kill him. Kill him with that knife just as he killed your wife."

Peter Dane looked at her with clouded eyes. "You better go. This isn't going to be nice to watch."

Little Limehouse Johnny started to say something, but only got as far as "Pete—" Then closed his lips.

"I'm going to stay," Antoinette told Dane. "I'm going to see you do it. It will always be a bond between us. You and I will have done it together." Her face was transformed. Blood lust and passion mingled in her eyes.

"It's a lie!" Park-Minton tried to shout, but his voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Le Bar and I, we weren't drunk. It was one of those unfortunate—"

"They reformed after it happened," Mordecai Breen interrupted, his voice hard. "They don't drink any more. They don't even have liquor in the house."

"They reformed too late," Dane said with dull relentlessness.

"Go ahead," Antoinette said with soft insistence. "Kill him."

Peter Dane glanced at Limehouse Johnny.

"Take her away, Johnny," he said. He slipped out of his coat and let it drop to the floor.

"Murder! Murder!" Park-Minton managed to scream, but not loudly. His throat was almost closed.

Moving like a cat, Antoinette snatched a doily from the dressing table, wadded it and stuffed it into Park-Minton's mouth when he again tried to cry out. Then she stood there, waiting, breathing fast.

Mordecai Breen, the sweat pouring down his face, the inside of his hands wet and clammy, said:

"Wait. Why kill him that way? Gets over too quick. I don't blame you for wanting to kill him, but there's a better way."

Peter Dane looked at Breen without comprehension. But his lean jaw was set, stubborn.

"He killed your wife," Breen said, "but he killed somebody else, too—his partner. He killed Le Bar." Mordecai Breen started talking fast. "I can prove it. He tried to make it look as though somebody from the outside . . . as though you had done it. I spied you in front of Park-Minton's house the night that Le Bar was killed and told him I'd seen you. I don't know how long before that he'd planned to kill Le Bar, or why. But your being there on the scene seemed to be an auspicious moment. He had already convinced me that you were out to get him."

Antoinette, through her teeth, said: "You're lying! Limehouse Johnny killed Le Bar. I sent Limehouse Johnny to do it, to save Dane from doing it. I was afraid Dane would get into trouble. I saved him. I saved him that night by phoning the police and telling them there was a fire across the street from Park-Minton's house, so that the police and fire engines would come and Dane wouldn't dare try anything." She looked at Limehouse Johnny as if for confirmation.

Limehouse Johnny shook his head. "I didn't do it, Antoinette. I wasn't ready. I didn't 'ave a chance to get the layout of the place. I tried to tell you the other day—"

Antoinette stamped her foot.

"What difference does it make who killed Le Bar?"

"You change your mind quick, don't you?" Breen snarled. "First you want to stop Dane from killing Le Bar and Park-Minton. Now you want him to do it." He turned to Dane. "If you stick that knife in him, it will be all over in a second. That's no way to get even. Make him suffer, make him suffer for months." Mordecai Breen could feel a trickle of sweat working down his chin and inside his collar. The muscles in his face went lumpish with the effort he was making. "Let's hand him over to the cops, let him go to trial for killing Le Bar. Think of it! Months and months in prison waiting to be tried. Then the trial, the public disgrace. Then the conviction, and then the death house. Days and days, each one moving along like years, knowing you're going to die in the end, that nothing can ever save you."

"Don't listen to him!" Antoinette cried. "He's just talking. He told you what he was—a dick, hired to protect Park-Minton. He's talking to save the doc and himself." Her manner was urgent, pleading.

"He did it," Breen said hoarsely. "I can prove it. Nobody in that house except Park-Minton could have killed Le Bar, unless you want to count the Jap or the nurse. Why would the Jap want to kill him? There's no sense to that. Maybe the nurse had some reason for killing him, but she didn't do it. She knows Park-Minton did it. She knows because just before we got here she blackmailed him out of three thousand dollars."

Park-Minton made a strangling, gurgling sound through the gag.

"Nobody from the outside did it," Breen went on, "because nobody got in from the outside. There was a hole cut in the window, a little hunk of glass with a piece of tape stuck to it for a handle so that it wouldn't fall and break. But if you try to fit that piece of glass into the window with the tape on the outside, it doesn't fit. But if you put it with the tape on the inside, it fits perfectly. Park-Minton had the thing with which to cut that glass. He's got it on him now—that diamond ring. He's a doctor and he must have adhesive tape in the house. And he had rubber gloves—all surgeons have—so that there were no fingerprints on the glass and none on the handle of the knife. The knife was an old hunting knife, something he'd probably had around for years.

"Nurse Carver found Le Bar dead in bed. She dragged him out of bed—never mind how I know; I know. She must have recognized the knife, but that alone wasn't enough. She was afraid that when it came to blackmailing Park-Minton, he'd say that the knife had been stolen from him, or something like that. She wanted to plant some evidence that no jury would disregard, so she stuck some cards into the dead man's hand—into Le Bar's hand. Somehow or other those cards prove that Park-Minton killed Le Bar. I don't know how they prove it, but Nurse Carver does and she's told Park-Minton. That's why she got three thousand out of him today—almost every cent he's got in the bank. Don't you see what a cinch it is? He's as good as in the chair right now. Why should you—"

Peter Dane's eyes looked tired.

"I don't understand it at all," he said. "I think you're trying to do something for me, trying to keep me from committing what you think is a murder, but it's no good. I've got to kill him with a knife, just the way he killed my wife. I've got to do it."

Antoinette was beside him. Her hand was on his shoulder. She was urging him toward Breen.

"Kill him first," she said. "He talks too much."

The import of her words didn't sink in.

"Won't you please go away," Dane said, "and take Johnny with you, so I can finish this?"

"You've got to kill the dick," she persisted coaxingly. "You might as well do it first. If you don't want to do it, give me the knife and I'll do it."

Dane shook himself free from her hand. At last the meaning of her words had penetrated his consciousness. He looked bewildered.

"Why should I kill him? I haven't anything against him."

Antoinette fell back a step. There was anger and amazement in her face.

"Haven't you any sense at all? Can't you see he's got to die? If we let him live, we wouldn't be safe. There wouldn't be any place we could go, you and I. He's got to die. It doesn't matter about the others, about Harry the Ox, about the baron, or Gimpy, or Johnny here. They can't squeal without tying themselves in. But this big louse, here, is different. He's a dick. If we let him live, he'll put you into jail. You'll burn. He'll put the cops on you."

"What difference does it make?" Peter Dane said stonily. "After this is done, I don't care what happens to me. I've got nothing to live for."

She flung herself at him. Her arms were around his neck. Standing on tiptoe, her lips were close to his.

"You've got me," she breathed, "me to love you always."

Breen turned his eyes away from them and looked at Limehouse Johnny. The little man had taken it all in like one in a trance, an odd look in his pale eyes. His body was trembling a little.

"You a friend of his?" Breen barked, motioning with his head toward Peter Dane.

Limehouse Johnny came to with a start.

"What?"

"You a friend of his?"

Limehouse Johnny nodded.

"Are you going to do anything to help save him? Are you going to let him commit a murder and get the chair?"

Limehouse Johnny shook his head. The look in his eyes became ecstatic.

"I can save 'im. 'E saved me once—"

And then it happened! It happened just as Peter Dane was gently disengaging himself from Antoinette.

A shot! Another and another.

Park-Minton's body quivered, then was still. His head dropped to his chest. Little Limehouse Johnny had shot him with the gun he'd taken away from Breen.

X.

Mordecai Breen said in a soft, surprised voice: "Well, I'll be damned."

Antoinette let out a scream. She sprang at Limehouse Johnny, seized him by the shoulders and shook him, her face unlovely with rage.

"What did you do that for?" she shrieked. "You've ruined everything. Dane can't be happy now. He'll never forget now. He wanted to kill him himself with a knife. You little fool!" Overcome with fury, she dropped her hands.

"I don't want Pete to go to prison again," Lime-

house Johnny mumbled. " 'E's a great guy, Pete is. I wouldn't want 'im to go to the chair." He shook his head again and again.

Peter Dane stood there stunned, his eyes hot, tense, and far back in his head.

"How about cutting me loose?" Breen said. His yellow-brown eyes were more yellow than brown now.

Peter Dane didn't seem to hear. He still stood staring at Park-Minton as though what had happened was beyond his understanding.

"How about cutting me loose?"

"Don't do it! Don't do it!" Antoinette cried. "You and I have got to get out of here, Dane. We can go away. I've got money—piles of money."

Peter Dane walked over to the chair where Breen sat. Mechanically he cut the rope that held Breen.

Breen flexed his arms and stood up.

"Keep him covered, Johnny," Antoinette shrilled. She dashed to a closet, brought out a long coat, slipped her bare feet into a pair of slippers, and donned the coat.

Peter Dane was at the door, about to open it. He had tossed the knife onto the carpet. With swift strides she was beside him, putting her arm through his, an arm that hung slack at his side.

"Come," she said; "let's go."

Peter Dane looked at her. "I don't want you," he said dully. "I don't ever want to see you again."

Antoinette fell back. In a still, small voice, she asked:

"You don't want me? I don't mean anything to you after all I did, tried to do? You—"

Peter Dane opened the door, stepped out and closed it behind him.

Antoinette, her face deathly white, stood still, only her lips moved soundlessly. Then she laughed, a laugh that was high, strident. It made an unpleasant sound, ear-splitting.

"The only guy I ever fell for," she shrieked, "and I'm poison to him." Again she laughed.

Mordecai Breen took a few steps toward Limehouse Johnny.

The little man, in a listless sort of way, raised his gun.

"I'm getting out of 'ere," he said.

"All right," Breen snarled, "but she's got hysterics. Can't you quiet her down?"

Limehouse Johnny took his eyes away from Breen and let them drift to where Antoinette stood. That was a mistake. Breen leaped. He knocked the gun out of Limehouse Johnny's hand, then hit him twice. Limehouse Johnny went down. He lay there inert.

Mordecai Breen turned back to Antoinette. She had stopped laughing, just stood there, every muscle in her sensuous body taut. Looking at Breen, her eyes filled with an insane glitter. Suddenly she made a few catlike strides, stooped, and her hand closed over the knife on the floor. She straightened up and slowly advanced on Breen. Breen backed away. She was out of her mind—temporarily at least—and the way she was holding that knife made her doubly dangerous. She wasn't holding it like a dagger with her thumb toward the back of the handle. She was holding it like a poker with her thumb toward the blade. It might have been easy to catch her wrist and disarm her if she struck a downward blow. But it wasn't so simple with the way she was holding that long knife. She would thrust from below, up. Breen could almost feel that sharp blade in his belly, thrust there with a strength that ordinarily would be beyond her.

His eye swept the room in a fraction of a second, looking for something with which to protect himself. The gun on the floor was too far away. Beside him stood a chair with a cushioned seat. He reached down, snatched up the cushion.

Antoinette sprang. The cushion moved through the air, struck her in the chest, fell to the floor, and as she leaped, she tripped over it. Mordecai Breen started for her, then stood still. Antoinette didn't move. Was she tricking him? Breen took a cautious step, another, and a third. Still she didn't move. And then the rose-colored carpet where she lay was suddenly marred by a dark, ever-widening stain.

Breen moved fast now. He turned her over on her back. The knife was buried in her breast. In trying instinctively to save herself as she went down, she had somehow fallen on the knife.

Breen rose. He stood staring down at her and shivered. He looked about the room. There had to be a telephone somewhere. A silk doll stood on the dressing table. Breen went over, picked it up, and underneath was the telephone. He called police headquarters and said:

"Give me Hammerstein."

Hammerstein was there.

"This is Breen," Mordecai Breen said. "I don't know where I am, somewhere off Fifth Avenue in the Seventies or Eighties." He gave the telephone number. "Trace the call back and find out where I am. Then get up here as fast as you can. I got a couple of dead people here with me, and one that's alive, or will be in a little while." He hung up, shutting off a torrent of profanity from Hammerstein.

Two days later Hammerstein ambled into Mordecai Breen's office. Breen was at his desk, drinking, his expression moody.

"How's the old sleuth?" Hammerstein said. He was in high spirits.

"I didn't get paid," Breen said gloomily, "for the last week that I worked for Park-Minton."

"That is rich," Hammerstein roared gleefully. "You fix it so a guy gets himself killed, then you're

sore that he didn't pay you. Did you see the papers?"

"Yeah," Breen said with disgust. "You got yourself a nice write-up. 'Sergeant Hammerstein of the homicide squad, single-handed, unearths huge blackmail ring while solving murder.'"

Hammerstein had the grace to look a little uncomfortable.

"You know how newspapermen are," he said. "You were one yourself once. I just forgot to mention you. Besides, I thought it would be bad for your business if it got about how your clients—this Park-Minton and Le Bar were your clients—got themselves bumped off."

"Oh, sure," Breen said, helping himself to another drink.

"Besides, *you* didn't tell me about Harry the Ox," Hammerstein went on virtuously, "or this Tessie Bonville that ran the joint, or Gimpy Myer and the rest of them. I got that from the little fellow you turned over to me, this Limehouse Johnny. He ratted on the others, figuring that he'd get himself a manslaughter rap instead of first-degree murder. Considering what you told me, I figure he ought to get off easy at that."

"Did you get the Carver woman?" Breen asked morosely.

"Oh, sure. No trouble at all. I found out from her why Park-Minton bumped off his partner, Le Bar. There's one sweet girl, that Carver woman. How I'd love to have somebody like that around my house! She tipped off this Peter Dane in the first place. Park-Minton and Le Bar were drunk when they operated on his wife. She had an idea that this Dane and herself could make a sweet thing out of it by blackmailing those two butchers. But it seems that this Dane didn't even stop to listen to that part of the scheme. He just made tracks for Park-Minton, and started knocking him all over the place. Le Bar came in just then. He hit Dane over the head with a poker and knocked him out, and called the police. And Dane went to prison. You know all about that. From then on, your friend Nurse Carver sort of took charge in a mild way. She fired Park-Minton's secretary and got herself a nice big raise."

Mordecai Breen sighed and helped himself to another drink.

"You take a long time to tell a story," he complained.

"Don't you want me to tell it all?" Hammerstein said in a hurt tone. "This Carver woman made it plain to Park-Minton that she knew why Dane had attacked him, that they'd been drunk when they operated on Dane's wife, and so Park-Minton couldn't fire her because a scandal would ruin his practice. Now she had plenty of chances to snoop around and find out a few things. One of the things she found out was that Park-Minton and Le Bar ran their practice like sort of a business, with Park-Minton in charge of all the money. And he lost it all in the market, not only his, but Le Bar's. And that Le Bar was going to quit at the end of the month and wanted an accounting. So when she found Le Bar dead that night—she was on the level about going to Le Bar's room for a sleeping powder—she knew who had done it. That little hunk of glass out of the window didn't fool her a bit. She remembered the knife, having seen it in one of the drawers of Park-Minton's desk. But she was going to make assurance doubly sure, so she planted them cards in Le Bar's fist after dragging him out of bed."

"I know that," Mordecai Breen said grumpily.

"You know everything, don't you?" Hammerstein said bitterly. "How did you know she dragged him out of bed?"

"Because the blood ran toward his chin and not down to his feet as it would have if he had gotten up by himself."

"Oh," said Hammerstein, a little crestfallen. "And I suppose you knew, too, that that window was a phony?"

Mordecai Breen nodded. "I knew that because I did something you should have done. I fitted the glass back into the pane and found that it would only fit with the adhesive tape on the inside."

A slow flush came to Hammerstein's face, but he rallied.

"I suppose you know all about the cards, too?"

"No," said Breen. "I haven't had a chance to talk to Nurse Carver the way you have."

"All right, then I'll tell you. The cards have numbers on them. There were ten cards with ten numbers. Here they are." Hammerstein took a slip of paper from his pocket and read off: "16—1—18—11—13—9—14—20—15—14. There's twenty-six letters in the alphabet, see?" Hammerstein went on.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Breen said wearily. "And every one of those numbers represents a letter. You've got ten numbers and there are ten letters in Park-Minton's name. P is the sixteenth letter in the alphabet; a is the first; r, the eighteenth; k, the eleventh; and so on."

"That's right," Hammerstein said disappointedly. "I got that all out of her by threatening to slap her in the can as an accessory to the murder of Le Bar—an accessory after the fact. I'm going to do it anyway. She's some baby."

Breen said: "You should have seen the other one—I mean in action—the one that fell on the knife. This Carver is stupid. No cop, not even you, in his right mind, would believe that a man with a knife in his breast dying, would stagger around a room to figure out this number gag and then spend time sorting out the cards."

"She wasn't so dumb as all that," Hammerstein protested. "She gathered up all the pencils and

pens in the room so that if she'd have to use that card clue and the police came back and began to look around, they'd figure that Le Bar didn't have anything to write with—couldn't write down Park-Minton's name before he died—so he'd hit on that scheme of telling the cops with the cards who the murderer was."

"If he had all that time," Breen said fretfully, "he'd have time to open the door and yell to me for help."

"I know, I know," Hammerstein said, "but it was the best she could do. And it wasn't so bad when you come to think that she had to have a clue that the police wouldn't catch onto, unless she sent them an anonymous postal card—a clue that would only frighten Park-Minton. And it must have frightened him. He probably figured that even if the police wouldn't believe in that card stunt, they would be put on his trail, whereas till now they hadn't even thought of him. They were looking for this Dane. What with you there and everything, he seemed like the guy."

Breen said: "Go away. I'm tired."

"Listen," Hammerstein said, his manner suddenly threatening. "What's become of this here Peter Dane? Attempted murder is a crime. You know that. I've got to find him and put him in the clink."

Mordecai Breen roused himself a little. His yellow-brown eyes took on a stormy look.

"You leave him alone, do you hear? He's been through enough. Besides, he didn't do anything, and furthermore he was crazy when he thought he was going to do something. No jury would convict him. I'll take the stand for him."

"Just the same," Hammerstein said belligerently, "I'm going to lock him up. I know my duty."

"You do, do you? Well, you'll look awfully funny when it gets into the papers that the great sergeant who single-handed rounded up a blackmail ring didn't have brains enough to fit a little hunk of glass into a windowpane to see if it was cut out from the inside or the outside."

Hammerstein's face purpled. "I've got a good mind to—" he bellowed.

"You got a mind," Breen said, "but it's not a good one. Have a drink."

Slowly the sergeant's color came back to normalcy. He tilted the bottle to his lips, put it down, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned.

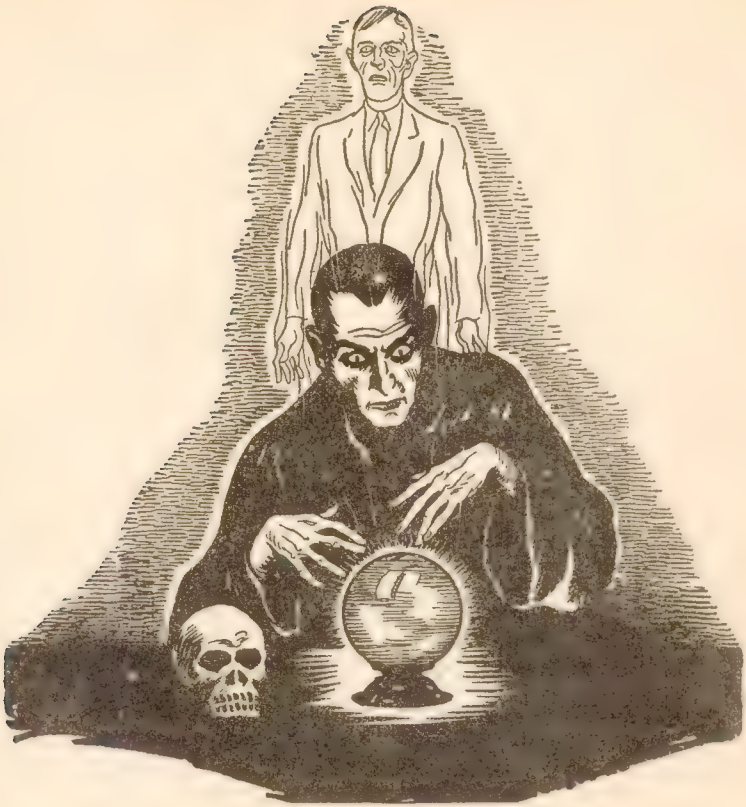
"No hard feelings," he said.

"No hard feelings," Mordecai Breen said, "if you leave Dane alone."

"You know who I feel sorry for?" Sergeant Hammerstein said. "It's that little Limehouse Johnny. He's a rat. He's always been a rat, but he's got something in him. You know what he said after he got through talking to me? He sort of stuck his flat chest out, and he said: 'Sarge, I'm no good, but I did one thing in my life that I'm proud of. I paid back Pete, wot did something for me once.' I feel sorry for the little feller."

"Sure," Mordecai Breen said. "And I'm sorry for myself. I should've got paid for that second week."

THE END.



THE WHISPERING SKULL

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

It was all the bunk, this stuff about the Winton skull. But the bullets were real enough to kill!

I.

"It's the bunk. I won't be a sucker. I won't believe in it." Janet Starr pressed her back hard against the uncomfortable straight chair, her eyes riveted upon the flimsy table and the crystal ball which was becoming strangely alive with light. She had examined that crystal a few minutes before, and it had been innocent of wiring or of battery compartments. She had examined the table, too, and it was too light to conceal any apparatus. There were no traps under it nor electrical connections. She had looked for them particularly.

Still, the crystal glowed now with some hidden fire. In the light haze above it, she could see the poised white hands of the little Englishman. Within the circle of light, too, she could see the yellow skull that was the haunt of the Wintons.

She had examined the skull, too. It had been dug, she was told, out of the ground upon which the Winton mansion stood. The men who dug the foundations had turned it up, but there had been no skeleton—never anything but the skull. It looked its age and it was nothing other than what it appeared to be. She had made sure of that and she waited tensely. She did not believe that that skull

or any other skull had ever whispered to anyone. In the tense darkness, she had to remind herself that she was a newspaperwoman and civilized beyond superstition.

She found herself at cross-purposes. She wanted the skull to whisper so that she could unmask the trick. She wanted it to remain silent so that she could scoff. Within her, too, there was a cold feeling of dread. A man had heard that skull whisper, and had disappeared. Or had he?

The Englishman slumped in his chair, a blurry figure on the fringe of the crystal glow—his hands weirdly visible, his body a shadow. The white blur of his face stood against the shadow. He neither moved nor spoke.

In her right hand, Janet felt the cold fingers of Ruth Winton. Her left hand rested easily in the firm hand of Maurice Belding, the lawyer. She was conscious of the others who formed the circle, because she had made it a point to note the position of everyone at the séance. Philip Coder was beyond Ruth and Clara Coder was beside him. The hands of Maurice Belding and of Mrs. Coder touched the Englishman and completed the circle.

On the table top, the crystal brightened and dimmed with the steadiness of a human pulse. Weird lights and shadows danced across the yellow skull—then there was a voice.

It seemed to come from the very table top—a hoarse, husky, whispering voice, unintelligible at first, but clearing gradually like the light of the crystal—steadying for a moment, then rising and falling as though the words were puffed out, with great effort.

"I come to you again. I speak for many who seek speech. You must be patient. There is trouble here. Something stands between you—"

Janet's body stiffened, and despite her resolve not to be deceived or bunked, she felt something cold on her spine. Ruth Winton's fingers had tightened convulsively on hers.

The words had not only come from the table top, but they had come from the skull. As the agonized whisper sounded in the room, the skull moved. It turned slowly on the table as though it would face each of its auditors in turn—and the bony jaw moved with the words, the teeth clicking eerily.

"Trouble here," it whispered. "Robert is waiting, but there is a wall, a wall—"

The voice trailed off to a sighing sound and almost died on the last note. Then the words came in swift, rattling staccato—husky, with a hissing emphasis.

"There is a stranger here. One in the circle does not believe. One scoffs and is without true interest. Impostor!"

Frenzy seemed to seize the skull. It danced on the table, the mouth opening and closing with the same strange clicking that was all but drowned out by the hollow thumping. Janet shrank back in her chair and she felt the blood surge to her face, then drain away. The skull was facing her, and there was a strange malevolence in it. It was insane, but she felt her common sense stampede. It couldn't be, but it was.

"Good night!"

With the rasping curtness of an old man, the voice snapped the words and the skull became silent. The light in the crystal dimmed, flickered like a candle in the wind and went out. There was a tense, heavy silence; then Janet felt Maurice Belding's hand withdraw from hers. The attorney stepped across the room, and the room was flooded with light.

Tom Austin, the little Englishman, lay slumped in his chair, with his eyes closed like a man in a drugged sleep. Before him was the crystal, a harmless-looking sphere of glass now. The yellow skull was as it had been before the séance.

"I guess that's all for tonight." Philip Coder rose from his chair. He was a tall, thin man with lantern jaws, pale eyes of gray-blue and sparse gray hair. He was Ruth Winton's stepfather, the man who had married into the Winton millions by marrying Clara Winton. For some reason he seemed relieved that the séance was over.

Ruth shuddered. Her icy fingers pressed Janet's hand. "We will go to my room," Ruth said.

"That will be fine." Janet's voice sounded strange to her own ears in the awkward silence. She saw Clara Coder looking at her, and she could well believe that Ruth's mother took these séances very seriously, and that the woman had loved her son, Robert. There was active dislike—almost hatred—in the woman's eyes. It was as though her son had actually spoken to her and warned her against the stranger in her home. Because of that look, it was hard for Janet to do what she felt that she had to do.

She stepped to the table and lifted the skull in her hands.

It was just a skull—an old and yellowed skull. There was no wiring, no springs, no apparatus. The table top was plain and unmarred, and there was no room beneath it for hocus-pocus. Her own legs had been beneath that table, and she would have been conscious of movement.

"I don't believe I would do that, Miss Corliss."

Maurice Belding, the lawyer, had taken a step forward. He was a tall, dark, handsome man of about thirty. He had a well-bred control of his facial muscles, and his eyes were expressionless, but there was a note of warning in his voice. He used the name under which she had come to the house, but he had paused significantly before pronouncing it. Janet could feel the eyes of the older woman fixed on her as she replaced the skull carefully upon the table.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It is my first time, you know, and it was all rather startling."

She was turning as she spoke, and, as she followed Ruth Winton from the room, she was painfully conscious of her feet and certain that they were too large for her body. No one in the room spoke, but the little Englishman, Austin, groaned softly like a man tossing in his sleep.

Outside, the hall was well lighted, but hung with something of the same atmosphere that had been present in the room. Janet did not have to be reminded of the tradition that ghosts walked here and always had, even before Robert Winton had blown his brains out three years before. She felt no urge to speak against the crushing weight of silence. Ruth moved ahead of her like a shadow. Once inside her room, she flung herself on the bed.

"You saw it," she said. "It is always like that, like something human. I don't believe in ghosts. I don't . . . but—"

She seemed to be forcing her words against an overpowering fear that she was wrong. Janet's throat felt dry. She took a cigarette from her bag and struck a match savagely.

"It's abominable," she said. "And you have these things three times a week? It's a wonder that you aren't all crazy."

"We are. We are." The girl's voice was almost a sob. "That's why I wrote to you. I had to talk to someone who knew nothing about us. When Peter disappeared right out of the room there, it was the last straw. I couldn't stand any more."

Her voice broke, and a strange staring look came into her eyes. Janet Starr shook herself impatiently. It was hard even for an outsider to think logically in this house. "Just how did he disappear?" she said. "A man doesn't—"

"I know. I tell myself that. He doesn't. A man couldn't. But Peter did. He was sitting next to me, holding my hand. Then suddenly he wasn't there at all. He just wasn't there."

Janet wet her lips, the forgotten cigarette burning between her fingers. "Who was there? The same people as tonight?"

"Yes. Yes. All of us. The skull was whispering, whispering. It never mentioned Peter. He went, vanished, and I wanted to scream and then—"

Ruth Winton's eyes were very wide, and her voice was trailing off into a vague montone. She acted drugged, but her pupils were normal and Janet reached over and gripped her wrist. Her pulse was a little fast.

"What did the others say?"

"About Peter? They didn't. They said my mind had gone blank. They said he didn't leave till after the séance and that I told him I had a headache and he left early." Ruth Winton's lips trembled. "I didn't. I know. I didn't."

Janet Starr remembered the cigarette and pulled on it. She smoked as a man smokes—to steady jangled nerves, to give her body work to do while her mind was active. Newspaper common sense was flooding back to her. It was easier to believe that this girl was hysterical and brain-fogged, than to believe that a roomful of such prominent people as those downstairs would join in such a fantastic conspiracy. Still, something was wrong and there were facts that clicked.

"You are engaged to this Peter," she said softly, "but he is much older than you. You don't love him, do you?"

The girl's body jerked. For a moment she seemed not to have heard the question, then she answered slowly. Her eyes were still dazed, her voice flat, toneless.

"I am very fond of Peter," she said. She sounded like a child reciting a statement of no particular importance. Then her eyes flamed with feeling and her body straightened. "If anything has happened to him," she said wildly, "I'll love him always—always."

The knob of the room door turned, and Janet's eyes flashed to the door. Mrs. Coder slipped in quietly and closed the door behind her. She was a little woman, wispy and thin, and with weird dark eyes that looked at things and people obliquely rather than straight on. Looking at her, it was difficult to imagine her as the mother of Ruth Winton, and more difficult still to understand that Philip Coder had married her within the past five years. The woman was prematurely old, dried out. lacking somehow in femininity. Her voice had a brittleness to it that was like the voice of a very old phonograph record—played too often and then forgotten.

"Ruthie is all upset," she said. "I'm afraid that you are not a very good influence for her, Miss Corliss."

She crossed the room with a strange mincing glide that made her seem as if she were floating. Ruth sank back on the bed resignedly, and her mother laid a blue-veined hand upon her head. Her dark eyes slanted toward Janet, and there was cold hatred in them.

"You probably did not realize downstairs how much our little visits with my son mean to Ruth and to me," she said. "He is ever faithful to his own, and, since he cannot be with us in the flesh, he avails himself of every opportunity to visit us. I am sure that he was prepared to like you, but he is wiser and more difficult to deceive than are we."

There was condemnation in every syllable. She was talking about her dead son as casually as if he were merely away on a trip. There was a tap on the door, and the little Englishman who had presided at the séance came into the room.

He was no longer the mysterious figure of the crystal and the yellow skull. Garbed in conservative livery, instead of flowing robes, he bore a tray with two cups. His face was wooden, expressionless.

"Tea, madame," he said.

There were only two cups, and neither Clara

Coder nor the butler took any notice of Janet. She shook her shoulders as though to dispel a sudden chill and turned to the door.

"I think I shall retire," she said. "Good night."

Ruth Winton lay on the bed with her eyes closed, and she might have been sleeping. Mrs. Coder did not turn her head. Janet turned and left the room.

Her own room was two doors down the hall. Once inside it, she locked the door and lighted another cigarette. She frowned thoughtfully and crossed to the window. Her eyes measured the distance to the ground via the gingerbread ornamentation of the lower-floor bay window. Her lips puckered in a thoughtful, speculative whistle.

"I don't like to fool with something I don't understand," she said softly. "The darn thing might be loaded."

She crossed to the closet, threw a cape over her shoulders, and slapped a ridiculously effective wisp of a hat on the side of her head. At the window once more, she hesitated only briefly before sliding over the sill.

"They can figure this any way they want to," she said, "but, if Peter went out of here under his own power, he had an idea."

II.

Grover Remington was sprawled in an easy-chair amid the wreckage of the evening newspapers, his long legs straight out in front of him, and his head bowed on his chest. The master of magic was not playing to an audience now. He was under no compulsion to be suave, self-contained, unruffled. He could be himself. And the Remington of tonight was a man reeling under a heavy blow.

PETER MOTT STILL MISSING

The flaming headlines across the front pages had held only slight interest for Remington. A few days ago, he would have been far more interested in anything pertaining to Peter Mott, and a year ago, he'd have been vitally interested. Tonight it made no difference. The item which had struck home to him was under a much smaller headline:

REMINGTON LOSES APPEAL IN GHOST TRUST BATTLE

Magician Fails to Produce Trumps in Court

To a newspaper reporter there had been humor in the idea of America's greatest magician being unable to produce needed evidence in court. To Remington there was nothing humorous in the idea at all. The decision had made him a poor man and had swept away his profession. More than that, it was the monument to double-dealing and treachery.

He had set himself up against the gyp mediums, the fake fortunetellers, and the blackmailing occultists. He had hurled charges against the organized ring which fostered the ghost racket, and provided exchanges for the dissemination of information on credulous people. As a square magician who didn't claim any supernatural powers, he had entered the lists against fakers who pretended occult power and knowledge. At his own expense, he had ferreted out the details of ring operation and, with an imposing array of witnesses, had gone into the courts to break the ring wide open.

In the test, his witnesses had let him down. People who had always appeared to be his friends in the theatrical profession turned suddenly against him and threw their prestige and their money behind the people he accused. At the showdown, he had been amazed at the size of the ring he had tackled, and even the police went against him. He was branded a faker, and his case was labeled a "publicity stunt." At the wind-up, he was sued for a quarter of a million dollars' damages. He lost the suit, had an attachment slapped on his show, and found the big producers in the theatrical game suddenly cold.

Now he had lost his last appeal, and he was washed up.

The telephone rang, and he lifted the receiver lazily. The voice of the desk clerk came over the wire. "Captain McCall is coming up, sir."

"O. K." Remington straightened up, swept the papers out of sight, and lighted a fresh cigarette. An audience, even a hostile audience of one, was always worth playing to. He squared his shoulders.

A full six feet, he looked taller in the straight-line black that he wore. The trim of his hair and the curled black mustache gave him a Mephistophelean look, and that was part of his act. He had always believed that the satanic touch belonged in magic, and he'd given it to them.

Heavy knuckles banged the door, and the knob turned. The lock was not set, and Captain Dave McCall of the detective bureau walked in behind the turning knob. He closed the door behind him and stood balancing from his toes to his heels. He was a gray-haired, steady-eyed veteran who had played a hard game, hard from the pavement to the desk.

"H'ar'ya, Remington? I see you got the rap." He took a wadded newspaper from his pocket and tossed it on the desk.

Remington nodded.

"I did. It was a hard one to lose."

The eyes of the two men clashed. They had never been friends, and McCall had been one of those on the force who had scoffed at the idea that any spook ring existed as an organization. During the period while the case was going through the courts, the McCall and Remington trails had crossed on a few criminal cases which had not created any friendly feelings between the men. McCall cleared his throat noisily.

"You know I don't like you worth a damn, Remington."

Remington nodded. "I'm not exactly crazy about you, either."

"O. K. It cuts double. But here's a friendly tip. Get out of town—and fast."

Remington's eyes slowly narrowed. "Why?"

"Here's why." McCall reached into his pocket and drew out a folded sheet of stationery. He flipped it on Remington's desk. "We've got ten of those, Remington, and all addressed to different people."

Remington picked the sheet up curiously. His jaw hardened as he read. The letter was dated over a week back and addressed to one of the most prominent of the professional spiritualists in the city.

Dear Sir: It has doubtless occurred to you that, where I have experienced difficulty in proving the existence of a ring organized to practice fraud through fake spiritualism, I will have less trouble in proving fraud on the part of individuals who may, or may not, be members of an organization.

I have certain proof in my possession of fakery in connection with your séances and will take action against you through the courts, with all the attendant publicity, unless you prefer to settle the matter quietly out of court.

You have until the first of the month to place ten thousand dollars in my hands in return for which I will surrender the evidence in my possession.

Very truly yours,

Grover Remington.

Very slowly, Remington laid the letter on the desk. He raised his eyes to the coldly appraising stare of McCall. "I never wrote that or signed it, of course," he said.

McCall shrugged. "It looks like your signature."

"It looks a lot like it."

"Well, there you are. The warrants aren't issued yet, but they will be. It's an extortion rap. When they're issued, I'll have to pick you up. I'm going to kind of hate to do it."

McCall's eyes were level. He was an honest cop, and his personal likes or dislikes didn't enter much into his job. It was no fun for him to make an arrest on a phony charge that might stick. Remington snapped his fingers.

"Somebody else is in bad on that, McCall. That's a rank forgery. I'll prove it in any court."

"Maybe." McCall was rocking again. "You gotta do that with handwriting experts, Remington, and they cost money. Maybe these other fellas have more money than you have. They'll have more experts. Maybe if your case don't look good after losing this one you lost, you won't be able to hire any handwriting experts at all. Those babies don't like to ride with losers. I'm handing it to you straight."

He was. Remington recognized it. When he was riding the crest, nobody would have dared such a raw frame against him, no handwriting expert would have gone into court against his reputation, and no jury would have believed him capable of extortion. He wasn't riding the crest any more, and the picture was changed. He laughed bitterly.

"So what?" he said.

"So, I still think you ought to fade out of town."

The eyes of the two men clashed again, and Remington had a new slant on this hard copper who had never liked him and who didn't like him now. The man was neither judge, jury, nor prosecuting attorney. If he got a warrant for Remington, he'd make the arrest, but he didn't believe that Remington wrote the extortion letters. Remington bowed.

"Thanks, McCall," he said. "I'll take your advice."

He put out his hand and, after hesitating slightly, McCall took it.

"Good luck to you," McCall said.

As he swung out into the hall and let the door slam behind him, Grover Remington's eyes followed him. "Good luck!" the man had said. It was a laugh for the gods. He had led with his chin, and he'd taken a royal beating. Not content with what they had done to him, the ring wanted to destroy him utterly. In the phony extortion letter, they had revealed the basis of their fear. Licked or not, Remington could continue to make trouble for individual members of the ring. This move spiked that.

He moved slowly across the room and sat down again in the easy-chair. They had left him without sufficient money to make another court fight. They had closed the doors to the theater to him by that verdict which would give them an excuse to attach anything he earned—and now they were making him a fugitive from justice.

"There doesn't seem to be an out," he said slowly, "so it ought to be right down my alley."

He closed his eyes, concentrating the forces of his will upon the problem. He had featured escape in his act, challenging handcuffs, strait-jackets, or cabinets to hold him. Well, here was a spot for a man who could wiggle out.

The bell of the telephone clamored, and he swore softly as he lifted the receiver. It was the desk clerk.

"There is a young lady to see you, Mr. Remington. A Miss Starr of the *Times-Herald*."

"Sorry. I'm not seeing anybody from the papers." Remington slapped the receiver down. He had barely settled into his chair when the phone rang again. He was going to ignore it, then changed his mind. A girl's voice sounded in his ear, a soft voice which vibrated to badly suppressed excitement.

"Mr. Remington. This is Janet Starr. . . . Yes, I know what you said. . . . I'm not going to ask you questions. I'll answer some. I just heard a skull, a

perfectly ordinary human skull, whispering."

Remington stiffened. It might be a new approach, but, if it was, it showed imagination. "Where did you hear it?" he asked.

The girl laughed. "I'll tell you when I come up. It was a house where you'd never expect a séance to be held."

Remington grinned wryly. "I'll hold you to that statement," he said. "Come on up."

III.

Remington heard Janet Starr's story through, without a change of expression. His penetrating eyes weighed and measured the girl before him as she spoke. She was young without being offensively so, and there was a breezy charm to her—the charm of a woman who is too busy to maintain an unnatural pose. Her eyes were deep, and there were lights in them when she talked. There was a vigor in her body rather than sensual appeal, but she didn't bulge in the wrong places. She could talk without chattering.

"That's all of it," she said in conclusion. "If they know I'm gone, they may figure the spooks got me. There are a lot of grounds around that place and they're plenty dark."

Remington nodded. "I'd like to see the letter that the girl wrote you in the first place," he said.

Janet Starr smiled. "Without that letter, I'm an impostor," she said. "Well, I don't blame you for being careful." She opened her bag. "As a double check you might call the *Times-Herald* and ask the first buzzard who answers you to describe the love-lorn editor. They've all looked me over."

"The letter will be enough." Remington took it from her hand and spread it out on the desk. It was obviously a hastily written note, done in pencil on very fine note paper, and addressed to Miss Janet Starr, Heart Department, the *Times-Herald*.

Dear Miss Starr: Do you believe in ghosts? If you do not, will you please help me with my problem? I will be of age in another month and will inherit the fortune that my father left to my brother and me. My brother is dead. My stepfather is very strict and I have few friends. He says that I am too young to protect myself against fortune hunters. I am engaged. My stepfather introduced me to Peter and I am very fond of him. Peter is rich himself and is not a fortune hunter. The other night Peter disappeared right before my eyes, unless there are really ghosts, or I am going crazy. They say our house is haunted and always was. Mother believes it. We have séances. Peter and I attend them, but Peter never believed in them much. The lights are always out, and I think it is fake, but the other night, when the lights came on, Peter was gone. They say it didn't happen like that, but it did.

Mother has made me stay in ever since and acted as though I were sick, but there is nothing the matter with me. I think that, perhaps, Peter wanted to break the engagement, and they don't want to tell me. They won't let me have newspapers to read even, so I can't get your advice unless you come out here. Tell them you are Miss Corliss. She nursed me when I was sick while I was away at school. Please come.

Sincerely,

Ruth Winton.

Remington raised his eyes. "How did she get this out of the house if she's watched so carefully?"

"My first question, too, Mr. Holmes. There's a little Jap chauffeur. She's used him before."

"Hm-m-m! And how does the family explain the disappearance of Peter?"

"They don't. They say that little Miss Moneybags had a headache after the séance and that Peter just walked out—that she forgets. He always drove his own car when he called on her. He drove away."

"To believe the girl you have to disbelieve Philip Coder, his wife, Maurice Belding, and this psychic butler, Austin."

"Right."

Remington smoked thoughtfully. "You've guessed who Peter is, of course?"

The girl's eyes twinkled. "I hope. He's the missing Peter Mott. That's a vote for the girl's story. He really is missing, and she hasn't seen a newspaper."

"So she says."

Janet Starr straightened. "I hadn't considered that." Her hand clenched. "I won't consider it. You didn't see that girl. They've made a sap out of her by keeping her behind fences. She talks and thinks like a high-school freshman, and she's old enough to be different."

Remington didn't answer. He was hearing the bugles in his blood. Peter Mott had become a rich man as attorney for the people who had, in turn, become rich out of ghost-ring profits. Money had flowed to him from fingers slimy with blackmail. He had not appeared in the case against Remington, but he had helped to prepare it. Now he was missing, and the trail led through the musky paths of occultism. There could be grim humor in that situation, and Remington was in a mood to appreciate grim humor.

The girl fidgeted in her chair. "You haven't showed any interest in the séance. I thought you would. That's why I came to you and kept mum at the newspaper. I've already got a swell story, but—"

"You know it can be a better one. It can. Besides, you're not a reporter."

"I used to be. A terrible one. I was so bad they put me on the column. But the skull? How was it done?"

Remington shrugged. "Any one of many ways."

Janet Starr looked at him, her eyes puzzled. "It wasn't ventriloquism," she said. "I thought of that. The skull's jaw moved. Nobody was touching it."

"It wouldn't have to be ventriloquism. And the skull's jaw could move." Remington rose.

Janet forgot to be professional. She was feminine. "Tell me how."

"Sometime perhaps. I never guess." Remington dismissed the subject with a gesture. "There's more to this than hocus-pocus with skulls. If you'll forget I'm Grover Remington, I'll go along with you on this. It interests me."

"Great." The girl came to her feet. "How'll we start?"

"By your leaving me alone a while. Chase down to that scandal sheet of yours and dig out the dope on that Coder-Winton marriage. Find out about that will and that suicide, too. Then give me a ring."

"I'm on my way." Janet Starr turned to the door. There was a glow in her eyes and a swing to her lithe body that brought a smile to Remington's hard mouth.

"I've got an idea you are going to be a tonic to me," he said. He turned back into the room.

He had no idea of how long he had before the law would be swooping down on him, but he had a notion that McCall would give him as much time as possible. He took the shaving kit out of his medicine chest and faced the mirror. The thin, Mephistophelean face of a professional magician was reflected in the mirror like a picture in a frame. Very deliberately, he worked the lather over the thin, pointed mustache, and poised his razor.

"Exit Grover Remington, master of magic," he said softly. There was irony in his quotation from the billboards of yesteryear. The razor sliced down.

Ten minutes later, with his eyebrows reshaped and the pointed sideburns squared off, he faced the image in the glass once more. The face that he saw now was deeply lined from emotions that had once rioted there before he became the stoic of the stage, but the satanic touch was gone. The jaw was a firm, clean line, the lips straight and hard, the eyes direct.

The telephone on the desk jangled.

As Remington answered, Janet Starr's excited voice came in swift staccato over the wire. "Flash. They've just found Peter Mott's body, and you'll never guess where. If you can get a prop camera somewhere, I'll put you on the scene with my press card."

Remington's hand tightened on the telephone. "I'll pick you up in ten minutes," he said. "Be out front."

IV.

The body of Peter Mott lay on the bare ground before the tomb of his ancestors. Death had taken him swiftly. There was a deep bracket in one corner of his mouth as though his lips had twisted in response to one sharp surge of agony. The muscles on his square jaws were ridged and blue. He had been a big man and in pretty fair condition, but he had never had a chance to fight for his life.

There was a small blue hole in his temple.

Above him stood Captain Dave McCall with his star homicide sleuth, Jeff Scanlon. The man from the coroner's office had finished his preliminary examination, and was wiping his hands in a handkerchief.

"Instantaneous," he said crisply. "You've got the gun, I think. Possibly suicide, but—" He shrugged.

"No powder marks." Scanlon squinted down at the body.

"That's right." The examiner turned away.

McCall stroked his jaw and looked toward the road. Gale ought to be on his way out with the suspect. There was nothing like the good old psychology of confronting a suspect with a cold body. It did things to them.

There was a soupy mist hanging low over Riverside Cemetery, and the cluster of police and press cars made a yellow-and-red haze about the burial plot of the Motts. The wet moss on the gray stone of the tomb had a ghastly saffron look in the unnatural light.

A grumbling group of newspapermen and photographers had been herded near a group of leaning and decrepit tombstones about fifty yards away from the body. Three uniformed coppers kept guard on them, and a sergeant took the brunt of the grumbling.

"You know you can't go swarming around no murder investigation in soft ground," he muttered. "You'd get everything all tramped up in no time. Be patient, will ya?"

Grover Remington was squatting behind the camera that he had bought in four minutes. It was not a prop camera, but fully as good as the average press box. There was a theatrical district hock shop where the right people could get service at any hour of the night. Remington had not been satisfied with the camera. He had a pair of night glasses under the dark cloth. Through them, every detail of the scene at the tomb was as clear as if he'd been at McCall's shoulder. He didn't even miss any of the conversation.

Lip reading had been part of his A B C of magic, and he was more adept at it than the average deaf person. Behind him, Janet Starr was engaging Haley, a *Times-Herald* reporter, in conversation. Haley was smoking a skinny cigar and striking matches every few minutes to keep it lighted.

"They'd never have found him probably if the watchman didn't get a hunch," he said. "This cemetery is as dead as the people in it. Just a few old families using up the plots they own. He was the last Mott, and nobody was likely to bother that old tomb."

"What gave the watchman the hunch?" Janet pitched her voice so that the question carried to Remington clearly, and Haley took the pitch from her.

"Aw, he just noticed a car come in the other night. Lots of cars come in and he doesn't stop

'em. They're mostly petting parties. The cops flushed up a dozen tonight, and some people are pale yet, I'll bet. Anyway, this car come in fast and left faster, and that's why he remembered. He's screwy about detective stories and he'd read about Mott doing the vanish—then blooie! He suddenly remembers that there's a Mott tomb in this spot, and he goes to the cops. The master minds at headquarters did the rest by sheer deduction and scientific reasoning."

"Marvelous, my dear *Holmes!*" Janet laughed softly. There was a whine of brakes and a crunching of cinders as a big car whipped through the gates of the cemetery and came smoking up the tree-lined road behind a battery of green lights.

"Damn wonder they ain't laying on the siren," Haley snorted.

There was another protest from the brakes and a cloud of dust as the police car rode to a stop with the four wheels locked. A tall, loose-jointed individual in a green felt hat climbed awkwardly from the tonneau and grunted at somebody still inside.

"Old Cash-on-delivery Gale," Haley said softly. "The guy with him will be the prospect for the hot squat. Gale's the tip-off. He's always draggin' somebody into court, or deliverin' 'em for hearings, or waggin' 'em to inquests. Wonder how he'd feel with a prisoner that wasn't secondhand."

The suspect had piled out of the car. Remington grunted when he saw him. As an object of suspicion, the man was a natural. The handy-man bodyguard of Peter Mott, Louie Slug Deshler, would have been on the spot, if he was a choir boy, because of his position—and he wasn't a choir boy. Slug had done time and he'd beaten raps on which he should have done time. He was a hot-rod man and bruiser from away back. The very sight of him would annoy any jury.

He had come to a dead stop on the fringe of the circle of light about the dead man. Remington had the glasses on him, and could detect every muscular quiver in the man's body.

Deshler was a big man—big, but not clumsy. There was something pantherlike in his loose-hipped carriage, the forward thrust of his head, and the small, alert, nervously moving eyes. His granite jaw was blue with stubble, and his gray hat rode the back of his head.

Jeff Scanlon of the homicide squad stood waiting for him, McCall at his back. Scanlon was not as big as Deshler, but he was fully as tough—a red-headed bully of an Irishman, with cold eyes and a big jaw. He snapped his fingers.

"Walk him over here!" he growled.

Gale prodded his prisoner lazily and fell into step behind him. He didn't have Deshler cuffed, but he kept his right hand in his pocket. Deshler shuffled forward. Scanlon's eyes were drilling him as the big bodyguard came to a stop within a few feet of the dead man.

"Know who that is?" Scanlon asked.

Deshler looked down and his mouth twitched. "Sure. Yeah. It's the boss." He gulped over the words.

Scanlon's eyes still drilled him.

"Mr. Peter Mott?"

"Yeah. Sure. That's him." Deshler was looking everywhere but at the body.

"Why'd you kill him, punk?" Scanlon snapped.

Deshler straightened. He gulped hard and his face turned sullen. "I don't know a thing about it. Nothin'."

"You're a liar. The watchman saw you drive in. His description fits you better than the clothes they'll fry you in."

Scanlon was leaning forward, bearing down with all the contempt he could summon. Deshler swallowed, and his eyes moved nervously.

Behind the glasses, Grover Remington frowned. Scanlon was a rough cop of the "slap-'em-dizzy" school, but even he should have realized that there were spots where he ought to trim. Deshler was an old stir bug and, guilty or innocent, he was going to go a little screwy if his memory was jolted back to prison clothes and customs. That identification stuff was crude hooey. Deshler wouldn't believe it if he were guilty, but he might believe that a witness would be framed on him.

"Take a good look, punk," Scanlon said. "You didn't even have nerve enough to use a man's gun, did you? Popped him with a lady's toy, with a .22. Nobody he didn't trust could get close enough to him to do the business with a thing like that."

Deshler shook his head. "I don't know nothin' about it."

"You were supposed to be his bodyguard, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I told you all that. He's been takin' trips without me. Goin' with a skirt, maybe. Why don't you find her?" There was an angry set to Deshler's jaw. His efficiency on his job had been challenged. There was pride left in him.

Scanlon stood there sneering. "Where did you kill him, Deshler?"

The big bodyguard stood flat-footed. His roving eyes came to focus on the mocking face before him, and he moved suddenly with the speed of a snapping spring. His body seemed to collapse as though all of the bones had been suddenly turned to water. Then out of the limp mass he hurled himself in a dive that swung him far to the left of the detective behind him. His big right hand came up like a weighted shaft—and Scanlon wasn't ready for it.

Police guns flashed as that whistling fist took Scanlon on the button, lifted him off his heels, and catapulted him into McCall. Close to the ground and swinging his hips like a football player running through a broken field, Deshler hurdled the two

fallen men and dived between two parked cars.

Gale fired three times at him and then ran forward. Two of the harness bulls, guns in hand, stumbled over the black graves as they raced to cut him off. The press group, galvanized into sudden action, spread out and joined in the chase—discreetly, but with the urge to be in on the kill. The picture squad, their cameras already in position, provided weird fireworks for a cemetery fog with their flaring flashes. Remington swore softly.

Some alert individual had succeeded in starting one of the parked cars and turning it partly around before it locked fenders with a neighbor and jammed one mud guard on a plot railing. The headlights did not go far out after the fleeing Deshler. The tomb of the Motts was in the way.

In the sudden glare, the interior of the old tomb was like a stage set. The iron door sagged open on rusty hinges, and inside there was an aisle of dusty stone that ran between triple-decker niches into which the coffins of previously deceased Motts had been placed. In this aisle, wrapped in an auto robe and with his own dead about him, Peter Mott had lain in death.

Someone had worked out an almost perfect scheme of body disposal, but a little detail had gone wrong, the most important detail of the theater—timing. Someone had driven too fast in a cemetery—and now Slug Deshler was playing deadly hide and seek with the cops amid the crumbling stones.

Remington folded his camera swiftly and turned around. Janet Starr had stayed with him, although she was looking wistfully out after the spreading chase.

"We're getting out of here—and fast," Remington said. "The cops are excited now, but, in a minute or two, they'll have quarantine on all these cars and—"

He didn't finish the sentence. It was going to be too bad if they rounded up the press gang and identified Grover Remington as a phony press cameraman. He was suddenly remembering that the gates of the penitentiary were oiled for him.

A man with a card in his cap was also cutting toward the road—a stocky, light-haired, deep-chested youth in a gray suit. He looked around, startled, when he heard footsteps behind him, but he didn't stop. Remington grunted.

Some reporter wasn't going to wait for the end of the chase. He was getting away to file his story now. Well, the more the merrier. A single car would be more conspicuous than two or three. The voice of the girl panted through the cemetery hush.

"Whoa!. Do you think I'm an athlete in training or something. Where are we going now?"

"To my car—and fast. It's still registered in the name of Grover Remington, you know."

Remington did not look around. He didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one. But, whether she was an athlete in training or not, Janet Starr was beside him when they reached his sleek black coupé. He bundled her in and felt her hand tighten on his arm.

"That girl, Ruth Winton," she said huskily. "Do you suppose she's in danger? She'd talk her head off if she knew Peter Mott was dead. *They* know it and—"

Remington nodded. "I do think she's in danger," he said. His eyes were grave as he looked down at the girl beside him. "That's why you've got something more important to do than writing a sob story. You've got to try and get back into your room out there the same way you left it."

Janet's eyes were wide. "Then what?"

Remington shrugged. "Then you'll be in danger, too," he said simply.

Off to their right the flashlights of the police were stabbing through the mist in an ever-widening circle. Slug Deshler had slipped away from them.

V.

The old Winton mansion stood on a hill above the oldest and most exclusive of the city's subdivisions. A gloomy pile of gray stone, its style of architecture was that of the early century. Its builders, however, had built for the generations still unborn. The house might be dated, but it would endure.

Beneath a noble elm, Grover Remington stood and watched Janet Starr pull herself up in the shadow of the bay window and grip the vines for balance as she started the perilous climb toward the dark window of the room she had left a few short hours ago.

The house was dark on this side, but there had been lights on the lower floor in front. Remington clenched his fists behind his back, his body rigid. He was hard and he would not have turned a hair at the prospect of going into the room himself from the outside—but he didn't like to see a girl do it. She'd been game for the job, but she'd known as well as he did what she was in for. The climb, with its danger of a bad fall, was the least of her risks. The odds were all in favor of her having been missed from her room. Already under suspicion, she'd be in a bad spot to offer explanations.

Somebody in that house had plenty of reason to be desperate.

Still, Ruth Winton might easily hold the key to the riddle of Peter Mott's death. Janet Starr alone had her confidence and the girl was depending on her.

A deeper shadow against the shadows, the girl was climbing the wall. Remington felt his pocket. In there he had the hasty notes that the girl had made for him from the *Times-Herald* "morgue." She hadn't had time to get all that he wanted before the flash on the cemetery find interrupted her, but what she did get was interesting.

Philip Coder had been a lifelong friend of old

Darius Winton and the childhood sweetheart of Clara Reade, who had married Winton. A year after Winton's death, Coder had married Winton's widow. Two years later, Robert Winton, his stepson, had committed suicide. There had been press rumors about that suicide and a police investigation, but the matter had dropped out of the prints without any startling developments. There was no apparent scandal in Coder's life. He had assumed charge of the Winton industries and had run them quietly and efficiently.

The girl balanced herself on the gingerbread fittings of the bay-window extension. She drew her body into a crouch and stretched her right arm out as far as it would go. She was many inches short of the window ledge on her best reach. Remington saw her sway. Then she straightened her legs, launched herself with the spring of her muscles.

She was a dark blur against a darker background for a moment, and then her hand flashed white as she gripped the edge of the sill and swung her body pendulumlike on the strength of her fingers.

Slowly, very slowly, Janet Starr drew her body up. She paused a moment outlined in the window frame and waved her hand; then the house swallowed her. Remington grunted his relief and turned away. It was his turn to move into action.

His plans were very sketchy. So far, he had been moved around more than he liked by the current of circumstance. There was the disastrous combination of defeat in a civil suit and the threat of a criminal suit. That double blow had robbed him of his background. The coming of the girl with her story which tied in so neatly with the disappearance of Peter Mott had been fortuitous, and he had had no option but to act. Now it was a time for moving to a motive and shaping his acts to a purpose.

There was a girl in danger and a man dead. Above them hung the shadow of the ghost trust and the cold-blooded menace that it represented. He had to find the agents of that danger and of that death, and he had to move against them. Ultimately it would be a police job, but he could not call on the police until the case was past the séance stage. He'd had experience enough with police skepticism and a wrong move in this game might be fatal. He was up against agents of the same slimy ring that had encircled himself. He'd bet on that. Perhaps—

He dismissed the thought that came to him. Some day he might break through that ring to vindication. This case might even present the opportunity. He didn't care to dwell on it. He had motives outside of himself—and a man with mixed motives is a man with none.

He turned to his left and started down the aisle of trees toward the highway gates to the estate. He took two steps and stopped. Someone else was moving on the grounds, someone who spoke guardedly.

For a moment he stood stiffly alert, then he turned and made his way in the shadow of the trees to the rear of the house. There was a garage and a paved drive and, to the left of the garage, a summerhouse set behind shrubbery where the ground sloped upward. He grimaced wryly and dropped to the ground, working forward Indian fashion and disliking the necessity.

Someone was talking in that summerhouse, and

such talk might mean nothing. At the same time, any conversation might be significant where men vanished from séances and skulls talked. As silent as his own shadow, he moved into range.

There were two people in the summerhouse—a man and a woman. As Remington came closer, he could see the girl clearly. Small, blond, rounded and fluttery-looking, she could only be the girl described by Janet Starr—Ruth Winton. Her right hand rested lightly in the palm of the man's left while he stroked it with his own right hand and talked earnestly.

Remington could hear the sound of his voice, but he could not distinguish words—nor could he come closer without betrayal. There was a moon, and the summerhouse was well designed for privacy. It was hard to surprise anyone in it. He could not even see the man clearly.

"Now who the devil!" he muttered. "If she was engaged to Peter Mott and in need of outside help and advice a short time ago, how does this happen and who is this bird?

He worked crab fashion into a new point of vantage and the man suddenly stood up. Remington tensed. The chap was of stocky build, deep-chested and light-haired, gray-suited.

It called back another picture of less than an hour ago—the picture of a man with a card in his hat who left the press group at the cemetery and hurried away to a car ahead of Remington and of Janet Starr. Ruth Winton rose and glided toward the entrance of the summerhouse, where she paused, looking at the man.

"I'll have to go back. Oh, I wish that—"

The man in the gray suit swept her suddenly into his arms and kissed her. "So do I," he said thickly. "So do I."

Remington faded swiftly back toward the trees. He'd given Janet Starr a longer head start into the house than he'd expected, and he couldn't waste very much more time himself. Janet's assignment had assumed more dangerous proportions with the discovery of a few minutes ago.

The frightened, helpless girl who was so completely under the domination of a half-cracked family was suddenly emerging in the scenario as a person with definite lines of communication with the outside; lines which brought her such vital information as that of finding Peter Mott's body before any newspaper could have supplied her with the news.

"Whose side of the fence is she on and who is the lad in the gray suit?"

Remington was frowning as he made his way once more toward the front of the house. There was a light in the window of the room which Janet had entered, and he stopped for a moment to look at it. No betraying silhouette crossed it, and there was no alarm, so he moved on toward the gates which opened on the main road. These gates were out of sight of the house itself, and he could step from the grounds onto the automobile road and approach openly as though he had just come from the highway.

He walked up the graveled road, careless of the crunching sound that his feet made. There was no watchman. He saw the lights in the ground-floor rooms as a soft glow through heavy curtains. There was a low-powered bulb in an ornate hanging fixture over the front door. He stepped up and rang the bell.

Somewhere in the house, the sound echoed. There was only a short interval before the door was opened by a sallow man of medium height—a well-set-up man who carried his shoulders well back and his chest high. Slatelike, expressionless eyes stared out of a face that had as much life as something carved in wood. This, of course, would be the mysterious Austin who went into trances while skulls wagged bony jaws.

"I'm Grove of the *Times-Herald*. I want to see Mr. Coder." The stiff dignity of the magician was gone. Remington slouched a little and threw his words carelessly. The man in the doorway was politely disinterested.

"Mr. Coder does not see anyone at his home without appointment," he said.

Remington smiled.

"He'll see me."

"I'm afraid not." Austin made no move to carry a message or to investigate the will of Philip Coder.

Remington dipped a hand into his inside pocket, drew out a blank sheet of the copy paper upon which Janet Starr had made her notes, and wrote rapidly.

"Give him that," he said, "and, if you're a betting man, I'll lay you odds that he sees me."

Austin looked shocked at the suggestion, and Remington was inwardly amused. The Remington of the mustache and the big career would have been shocked, too, at the idea of laying bets with servants in strange households—but he was on a holiday from formality.

"You will wait, please." Austin closed the door on him and disappeared.

Remington lighted a cigarette and looked out over the grounds. He would not have been asked to wait outside any door as Remington the great. The shaving off of a mustache made a social difference.

VI.

The man in the gray suit had not been Austin, the thrower of trances. Remington was not very surprised at that, but he was glad to check the fact off the list of possibilities. There were always many minor mysteries to be solved before one could solve a major mystery. He puffed at his cigarette thoughtfully.

The door behind him opened suddenly, and he turned. Austin was holding the door for a tall man

in a tweed lounging suit—a young, dark-haired man with a black mustache and a success-early-in-life air.

"Just what did you want?" The man's voice was abrupt.

Remington looked at him coolly. "Philip Coder," he said. "Just exactly what I asked for. If I can't get him, I can get McCall of the cops—" He put a definite threat into his lazy drawl.

The man in the tweeds lost some of his aggressiveness. "I'm Maurice Belding," he said. "Mr. Coder's attorney. I am sure that I can give you any information that you want."

"And I'm sure that you can't."

The eyes of the two men dueled. Belding had the kind of brown eyes that are shiny rather than warm. They didn't hold well in an exchange. He shrugged.

"I'll do what I can for you," he said haughtily.

Remington looked at his wrist watch and smiled without mirth.

"I'll give you three minutes," he said.

Belding's lips tightened. He hesitated a moment, then swung on his heel and went back into the house without a word. This time the door was not closed. Austin stood guard beside it. There was not the shadow of an expression on his face. Remington looked at him thoughtfully, then looked away out over the grounds.

He had checked another fact off the book. The man in the gray suit had not been Maurice Belding, the lawyer. Belding was the type of man who might be found with girls in summerhouses, but he wouldn't have passed unnoticed so easily in a group of newspapermen at the discovery of a dead man. There was something individual about him. He wouldn't merge easily into a group. He'd be something on his own.

Well within the three-minute limit, Belding was back. He nodded curtly. "Mr. Coder will see you for a few minutes."

Remington found no answer necessary. Austin stepped aside, and Remington followed the lawyer down the heavily carpeted hall. Philip Coder was standing beside his desk in a study that was lined with book-filled shelves. He was a tall, lantern-jawed man with sparse gray hair—a bony, long-legged man who looked like a tough opponent for anyone who might be disposed to cross him. There were deep brackets about his mouth now, however, and a putty-gray to his complexion. He was holding Remington's note in his hand.

They have found the body of Peter Mott. The police haven't traced him back this far yet. I have.

Grove, *Times-Herald.*

Philip Coder was the type of man who wastes very little time on the amenities. He wasted none now. He waved the note. "You say that Peter Mott is dead? Tell me about it."

"Decidedly dead—and delivered to his own tomb." Remington tilted one shoulder toward Maurice Belding. "The rest is for you personally, Mr. Coder."

Coder's eyes froze over. "Mr. Belding is my attorney."

"That's all right. I'm still talking to you personally and alone."

Remington had made no motion to sit down. He had thrown his challenge and he was ready to bluff a walkout. Philip Coder stared at him a moment and then waved his hand.

"You'd better leave us, Maurice." His voice was flat, controlled, but there was anger under the surface of his calm. His expression said that Remington's story had better be good.

Maurice Belding drew himself up stiffly, threw a look of hot dislike at Remington, and stalked from the room.

Remington sat down.

His eyes had been busy, and he had practically memorized this room. It was his habit. He worked on stages and sets, and he worked usually with effects. Lights and shadows played a big part in the business of weaving illusions, and Remington noted such detail automatically. His eyes met the challenging stare of Philip Coder.

"I'll lay my cards on the table with you," he said, "and I'll trust you to do the same. Peter Mott went to his death from this house, from a séance on this floor. The police do not know that, but they'd like to. Peter Mott was going to marry your stepdaughter, who comes into a fortune in thirty days. The police don't know that, either."

Philip Coder stiffened in his chair, then he slumped forward with his elbows on the edge of his desk. He worried a cigar with his long fingers. "Where did you learn that?" he asked huskily.

"Where I learned a few other things. It would make a sensational story, Mr. Coder."

The gray-haired man nodded. There were prominent blue veins in the lids that drooped over his pale eyes. The first shock was wearing off.

"It would," he said. "You want money to kill it, of course. How much?"

It was so direct that Remington was startled. He was new in the role of reporter, and he had not learned to anticipate moves like that. His mind flashed over the possibilities. He could let himself be bought, of course, and see where the trail led him. He shook his head.

"You've got me wrong," he said. "The story is not for sale. What I want from you is truth. I want to give you a square deal."

It was Philip Coder's turn to be surprised. He measured his man, and Remington had been measured before. The expert generally found steel under any pose that he affected. Philip Coder lighted his cigar.

"Strangely enough," he said, "I believe you. What do you want to know?"

"The reason for these séances of yours, whether you believe in them, why you were marrying your stepdaughter to a man too old for her, and what happened to Peter Mott here on the night that he disappeared."

Coder smoked thoughtfully. He showed no surprise at the list of questions. He was a man of decision. "The séances came about naturally," he said. "The house was reputedly haunted from the start. Workmen found a skull when they were digging the foundation. I never heard or saw anything personally. My wife did. Many servants did, and I am told that various people did before I made it my home. After my stepson's death, the manifestations increased and my wife had an idea that her son was trying to communicate with her."

"And your medium, Austin?"

Coder shrugged. "He is not a medium. He is an Englishman. Served in the army in India. He's psychic and he's picked up a few tricks. He was with us for several years before we had any séances. He started them to oblige my wife."

"You believe that he talks with spirits, that the dead come back?"

Coder shrugged. "I don't know anything about it. But I'm pretty hard-headed." He rolled the cigar along his lips. Suddenly his fist hit the desk.

"You want my personal affairs. I'll tell you. I married a big fortune and I didn't have much of my own; but I never got any of that fortune and I never will have any of it. I'm Darius Winton's executor. I take a salary as head of his companies, and I earn it. There were a lot of slurs about my stepson's death, but I threw the books open to a firm of accountants, and there was more money in the trust than there was when Darius Winton died. Darius did not leave a penny to his wife. He left her an income which never increases or diminishes. I married her because I'd never loved anyone else. She needed me."

Remington sat back. He was a little awed. This man carried a big scene with all the force of Mantell playing Lear. It had been pent up, and he understood that Philip Coder was not talking now for the sheer sake of talking. He had a newspaperman with a dynamite story who must be won over to his side.

"My stepdaughter comes of age in a month. The money is in the trust for her—all of it—her own share and her brother's. There has been no juggling, nothing to cover up. I favored her marriage to an older man of means because she'd be the prey of cruel swindlers. Peter Mott loved her, and I'm sure of it. A young woman can find many men whom she thinks herself in love with. It is more important and harder to find one who loves her."

The bitterness of the man's own past seemed to be choking in his throat then. His clenched fist suddenly relaxed. He looked directly at Remington.

"My wife's mind has failed greatly since her son died," he said. "My stepdaughter has been exposed too much to this séance hocus-pocus. It would be damnable to have police poking at either of them with questions. Peter Mott left here cheerful and well. His visit here, I am sure, had nothing to do with his disappearance and death. I kept silent because I have been sure of that. I'm telling you what I have told you because I have to protect my family."

Remington nodded. He, too, was a man of decision. "You have shot more than square with me, Mr. Coder," he said. "I'll go all the way with you. I am not Grove of the *Times-Herald;* I am Grover Remington."

As he spoke, he became aware of some change in the lights and shadows of the room. It was not a conscious impression, and he did not know if he heard anything or saw anything—but he did sense something. He jerked to one side, but he was too late.

An icy finger passed along his skull, and he heard the sharp bark of a pistol. A dark curtain fell on his act, and, as he pitched forward, some gibing monitor in his brain had a last laugh.

"You tried to be smart, Grover Remington," it said, "and you got yourself shot."

VII.

Janet Starr held her breath as she slid across the sill into the blackness of the room. There was no sound to alarm her, but she kept away from the lighted square of the window which would silhouette her to anyone in the room. Some instinct within her was sounding a warning.

She had that peculiar sense of presence that some women possess in respect to rooms they have occupied, no matter how briefly. She knew, without being able to explain why, that someone had entered this room since she left it. For some seconds, she stood motionless, but the darkness was a quiet dark. She shrugged her shoulders nervously.

"I'm playing baby," she said. "I'll have to snap out of it."

With another deep breath, she crossed the room and snapped on the switch near the door. The room was empty, and the door was locked as she had left it. She opened the drawers of the old-fashioned bureau and looked at the contents without disturbing them. They looked orderly as she had left them, but again she knew that appearances were not enough. Someone had made a search through her belongings. She laughed shortly.

"They didn't find any proof that I'm Miss Corliss," she said, "but didn't find any proof that I'm not, either. I don't go into action carrying billboards."

There was no connecting door into adjoining rooms, and she did not know who had the rooms

next to her. Ruth Winton's room was two doors down the hall, and Ruth was the only one in that household that she had any desire to see at the moment. She clutched her bag which had traveled

with her through all the steps of a hard evening, and the hard outline of her small automatic comforted her. When news reached this house that the body of Peter Mott had been found, Ruth Winton became a damaging witness against somebody. Things frequently happened to dangerous witnesses.

She crossed the floor and slid the door open a crack. The lights in the hall had been turned off. Surprised, she stood there for a second; then she became aware of the pool of light that formed around the doorway to her own room. She reached behind her and snapped the switch. Complete darkness blanketed the hall. No single line of light showed beneath any door, and there was no pale diffusion of light from downstairs.

She remembered that the lights below were fairly dim, and that the stairs were winding. The upstairs halls were in the shape of a U with the short member at right angles to the stairs. She raised her hand, and a sudden weird glow of light close to her face sent her back on her heels with a gasp. Then she smiled foolishly. Her watch had a radium crystal that threw off a spooky glow in such darkness as this. She looked at the hands.

"Twelve. Midnight. The haunting hour," she said huskily. "No wonder I'm jittery. This place has me spooked."

Her knees were trembling, and she had to whip her will to make the first step toward the room of Ruth Winton. She only took the one step. There was a soft pad of footsteps from the direction of the stairs, and a feeble glow of light from around the turn of the U.

Swiftly, she retreated into her room; holding the door open a crack, and breathing deeply to still the hard thumping of her heart. "I wouldn't be afraid of a person with a light any place else," she said shakily, "and I'm not going to be afraid here. I won't—"

She broke off abruptly. The hall became suddenly a page torn from Shakespeare. Around the bend, a lighted candle clutched in one thin hand, came a woman in a white nightgown—a woman whose straggly gray hair fell about a bony face out of which great brown eyes stared.

"Mrs. Coder!" Janet's fingers held tensely to the doorknob as the woman came on.

The flame of the candle danced and flickered while macabre shadows marched grotesquely along the walls and postured menacingly on the ceilings. It was Lady Macbeth in a new setting, a setting worthy of her ghostly march. And the hour was midnight. Janet Starr dug her nails into the palm of her hand.

"It is not weird," she said. "It is not ghostly. It is not coincidence. There is an explanation. There is always an explanation. I must remember Remington."

It was hard to remember Remington. Clara Coder was looking neither to right nor to left. Eyes fixed, she marched with steady purpose, and her face was strangely changed from what it had been when the lights went on after the séance. The hardness and the hate had been wiped out of it, and with her chin uplifted now and the candlelight playing over

her seamed features, there was a spiritual quality about her, an exaltation, an inner glow that gave her face a strange beauty.

Janet watched her with a feeling of awe, but the woman was unaware of watching eyes. She swished by with a soft rustling of garments as a ghost might pass—her march a floating glide as though some inner feeling lifted her up and swept her along without the necessity for touching earth.

The knob of the door beyond Janet's turned under the woman's hand. The door opened on oiled hinges, and she was gone. The hallway was dark once more, and the light of the candle was too feeble to flow beneath the tight line of the door.

For a moment only, Janet hesitated; then she was gliding swiftly to the door of the next room. Her hand trembled on the knob, and she pressed the door gently. It gave under her touch and the pale light leaped in the thin crevice. She heard an unbelievably soft voice speaking.

"Son, I'm sorry that things were wrong tonight, that there were intruders present. I wanted so much to talk to you. I am worried about Ruthie."

Janet trembled. She realized suddenly the significance of this unearthly pilgrimage on the haunting hour of twelve. This room next to hers was the room of a great sorrow—the room in which Robert Winton had shot himself to death. The clock of Clara Coder's life had stopped with that tragedy, and her séances were not enough. She had to have something more personal.

Then, suddenly, there was a masculine voice in the room—a young voice, slightly blurred and husky, as though with a cold, but soft, nevertheless, with affection.

"I know, mother. I wanted to talk with you, too. You know that. But you can't understand conditions here. I knew that you would come tonight and that you would understand."

Janet pushed the door open wider. Her heart was thumping wildly again, but she had to look inside that room.

Clara Coder was there, and she was kneeling beside the bed, with her face uplifted and with that same rapt expression that she had worn as she came down the hall. Her head was slightly tilted to one side, as though she were listening, and there was a smile on her thin lips. The candle made dancing light in the room, and there was no place where one might hide. The corner from where the voice seemed to come was the barest spot in the room. And Clara Coder was alone save for that voice.

Janet rocked back on her heels, and there was an icy quiver along her spine. For a moment her tongue stuck in her throat, and she had to remember Remington again. There was no such thing. It was a trick and had to be. Her fists clenched.

"It's cruel," she whispered. "Too outrageously brutal."

Some of the fierce feeling of rage that had sent Grover Remington into a hopeless fight against the exploiters of grief swept through her and she drew back. She couldn't look at Clara Coder's face any longer, couldn't see that holy faith there in something that couldn't be.

Softly she drew the door after her, her body poised beside it in the hall. She had to listen since it might affect Ruth and the mission which had brought her to this house, but—

Suddenly there was the crack of a shot downstairs.

The echoes leaped spitefully through the halls and Janet's heart flipped slowly over. Grover Remington was going to follow her into this house by means of his own!

The echoes were still booming when a door down the hall wrenched violently open. Janet had no time to get out of the way as a man leaped into the hall and raced toward the stairs. She saw him as a vague blur that rushed toward her out of the darkness, and her hands went up instinctively. He cursed as he crashed into her, and her body spun with the impact. She felt herself going down and grabbed desperately. Something gave, and she spun into the wall before she hit the floor.

The man didn't stop, and, as she sat up dazedly, she found herself clutching hard on a button to which a shred of cloth still clung.

VIII.

Shaken, Janet Starr struggled to her feet. She looked dazedly at the button and turned toward the stairs. The spiteful echo of the shot still traveled through the high-ceilinged halls, and she noted mentally that there had been no heavy-caliber boom. It had been a whip-crack shot, and her mind reverted instinctively to that other man who had been shot, reputedly with a .22.

The man who had knocked her down was gone. She heard his feet hitting the stairs, and then trace of his progress was lost. She had taken only a few steps herself when there was a patter of footsteps behind her. She turned on the defensive and looked into the white face of Ruth Winton. The girl was wide-eyed, panting like a tired sprinter.

"Please don't go down there," she gasped. "A man has been shot."

Janet stiffened. Something icy moved in her veins. Her fingers closed on the girl's wrist. "Shot? Who was shot?" Her words sounded to herself as though they came from some deep vault within her being. Ruth pulled away from her grip.

"I don't know who. It was a stranger."

Janet's lips tightened. "Stay here, then," she said. "I'm going to see."

Ruth Winton's breath caught. She threw herself forward. "No. Please. You can't. Please stay

with me. I'm frightened. They don't know who killed him. The murderer may be hiding."

The hall seemed to spin around Janet for a moment. She knew that she was staring at Ruth Winton, but she was not conscious of the sense of sight functioning at all. She saw nothing. Every faculty was suspended while two words echoed again and again in her brain. "Killed! Murderer!"

The man who was shot was a stranger to Ruth Winton, and Grover Remington had planned to enter this house. Those two simple facts linked up damnably in Janet's brain, and she could almost see Remington lying in an inert heap as Peter Mott had lain. She shook herself to dispel the vision.

"How do you know that the man was killed?" she challenged huskily.

Ruth Winton's white face swam before her.

"He was shot, shot in the head. I saw him."

The words had a ring of awful fact to them, but Janet felt her grip coming back. Grover Remington was still the master of magic, the king of escape artists. He couldn't be dead. Her brain would not accept him as dead. She pulled the girl back along the hall.

"I've got to know more," she said. "Let's go to your room."

In the dark, she could hear her own heart beating, but it sounded like a steady beat. She had a job to do. Remington had emphasized that and, dead or living, he would expect her to do her job. If he were really dead, she could not serve him by going downstairs, and she might play into the hands of his enemies. There would be no hiding it if he had been killed here. If he still lived, he could take care of his own plans without her. The girl was still her responsibility.

Ruth Winton pressed the wall switch and flooded her room with light. Janet stood against the door and looked at her. The hard feel of the automatic in her bag was comforting. There might be a killer loose in this house who would make this room his next stop. Deshler, the apelike convict who had escaped the police, might even be on the prowl.

The thought of prowlers reminded her of the button. She still clutched it—a plain black button with shreds of gray cloth clinging to it. Ruth was staring at the button, but Janet volunteered no information. The button went into the bag with the automatic.

Neither girl spoke. Ruth brushed the hair back from her forehead with a quick, nervous gesture and looked toward the windows. She had deep shadows under her eyes and she was deathly pale, but there was a subtle change in her. She was, somehow, more mature than she had seemed a few hours ago. Janet sensed it.

"I wish I were a good reporter just for tonight," she said inwardly. "There's something about this girl I'm missing. My brain isn't cold enough to get it. I'm still running a damned department, and this is the front page."

Aloud, she said quietly: "Tell me all about it—please."

The girl was running a sheet of paper through her fingers, folding and refolding it. "I went downstairs for a talk with Maurice, with Mr. Belding," she said slowly.

"Why with him?"

"Because I couldn't find you. I had to talk to somebody."

Janet lighted a cigarette, as unconscious of what she was doing as a man would be. She was trying to make her brain cold.

Ruth didn't look at her.

"Maurice is always very kind," she said.

"You're in love with him?" Janet threw the question. It seemed to pass right by the girl on the bed.

"He's always very kind to me," she said again. Then, as though the thought had just occurred to her, she murmured: "He's very good-looking."

"Like that, eh?" Janet crossed the room in two strides, gripped the girl by the shoulders, and shook her. "Look at me!" she said. "You've got to snap out of it. You saw that man shot, and all that you can talk about is another man's good looks. Tell me facts for once—and fast."

Ruth Winton shuddered, but the eyes that she raised to Janet's face seemed colorless, soulless.

"I don't know what happened," she said dully. "I was talking to Maurice, and there was a shot. We were in the museum, and the shot was in my stepfather's study. Maurice ran in there, and I looked in the door. The man was shot through the head." She shuddered again and clenched her fists. "There was blood. I . . . I ran away."

Janet swallowed hard. "What did the man look like?"

"I don't know. He was a stranger."

"And the museum is right next to the study?"

"Yes. It's all filled with cases and stuffed animals and things. It's quiet. Maurice and I always talk in there."

Janet felt unaccountably angry. "Oh, you always do! Does he make to love to you?"

"Sometimes."

"And you're in love with him?" She threw the question a bit savagely.

Ruth Winton looked away.

"I was engaged to Peter," she said.

"Was?" Janet seized on the word. "You know that he's dead then?" It was brutally direct, but the girl didn't flinch.

"I know now," she said dully.

Janet wished suddenly that she could swear as a man swears and get relief in the process. She took two hard puffs from the cigarette, walked backward and forward across the room, then came to a dead stop, with her lips a tight line.

"You aren't shooting square with me," she said

hotly. "You haven't shot square from the start. You know more than you pretend to know, and you feed out just enough to keep me stirred up. Well, I'm washed up. I'm not taking any more risks for you. You talk, or I'm walking out of here now."

Ruth Winton looked up, surprise in her white face. "I don't know when I'm lying and when I'm telling the truth," she said simply. "I never know any more."

"No? Well, you can guess at it. How about that séance disappearance story? Did Peter Mott disappear or didn't he?"

The girl's forehead puckered into a frown. "Sometimes I think that maybe he didn't," she said, "but all the time I'm sure that he did."

She broke off abruptly, and there was a sob in her throat. "You don't understand," she wailed. "You can't. I hoped that you would, and that's why I sent for you. I thought you'd find out things about me that I don't know."

Janet stared at her in disbelief, then she melted. The girl seemed so young, so woebegone, so utterly bewildered—and Janet was remembering the terrible background of suicide and séances. She dropped to one knee. "I'm a fool," she said huskily. "I'm a sloppy columnist when I ought to be a brittle scribe, and I'm a hard-eyed news hawk when you need a shoulder to cry on."

She took one of the girl's hands in her own. "Why don't you know about Peter Mott?" she asked.

The girl's body jerked as though with violent hiccups, and for a few moments she made no attempt to speak, then she raised her head and the storm was over. She was dry-eyed, desperate.

"I don't know because I forget too much," she said. "Every time I think about him, I remember distinctly that Peter was at the séance with me and holding my hand, and that when Maurice turned on the lights, Peter wasn't there any more."

"You remember that distinctly?"

"Yes. But the funny thing is that I don't remember anybody else when the lights came on. I don't remember people being surprised because Peter wasn't there, and I don't remember screaming or looking for him and any excitement or anything."

Janet puckered her forehead. "The others say that nothing like that happened."

"Yes. They say I had a headache and said good night, and that Peter left."

"You can't remember that?"

"No. I didn't have a headache. I know, because—" She stopped.

"Because of what?"

"Because I remember other things that happened later that night when I didn't have a headache at all."

"What things?"

The girl looked away, and for a moment there was color in her white face, then her shoulders slumped. "Just things," she said.

She'd had her flash of animation and she was lethargic again, drained—and, somehow, Janet sensed, terrified. She was like a shell—an empty shell.

The phrase "empty shell," trite though it was, did something to Janet's thought processes. Disordered facts clicked into place, and she jerked bolt upright. A person who was actually an empty shell would be a sort of ghost, a living ghost. If Remington had suddenly materialized in the room and spoken to her, Janet could have felt scarcely a greater impact. She knew, almost, what he would say.

"A living ghost? There are no ghosts. Living or dead, they don't exist. There is an explanation for everything."

Her taut nerves relaxed and she snapped her fingers with a loud click that brought Ruth Winton's head up with a jerk. "A ghost!" she said aloud. "Of course, you're a ghost, child! Somebody's stolen your will from you. They've hypnotized you with that skull business and—"

The girl's eyes widened, and she stretched out one hand as though she would clutch at something that was eluding her. Then she broke, and harsh laughter rang from her lips—laugher that died away into sobs. She brushed hard at the hair that hung in wisps over her eyes.

"No. No," she said. "It's worse. It's worse. It's my conscience. My mind went blank on me because it was so awful." She was breathing deeply, hoarsely, and grabbing frantically at Janet with the despairing hands of a person who is drowning. Her eyes were twin pools of terror.

"I killed Peter myself," she said.

IX.

"I killed Peter myself." The statement falling so baldly from the lips of this strangely contradictory girl was more shocking to Janet than the crime itself.

Janet rocked back on her heels and stared at the white face before her, conscious of the fact that the girl was gripping her fingers tightly with the desperation of one who sees a precipice at her feet.

"You didn't kill him. You couldn't." The words came brokenly from Janet's stiff lips.

The girl swallowed hard, a sob rising in her throat.

"I did," she said. "Murderesses often forget. Your mind goes blank when you pull the trigger."

"Who told you that?" Janet was suddenly alert again.

The girl was reciting by rote. Ruth made a vague gesture.

"Maurice told me. He had helped me so much. He . . . he arranged about the body—"

"What about that story of Peter disappearing at the séance?"

Ruth Winton did not seem to hear. She stared into space, and there was a crease of desperate concentration on her forehead. She shrugged her shapely shoulders despairingly.

"I don't know," she said. "I want to believe that. I remember it that way. But it can't be. Peter is dead, isn't he?"

Janet nodded gravely. "He is."

"Shot?"

"Yes."

Ruth shrugged again. "You see. I can't believe what I remember. That's why I think I'm going mad."

Janet rose to her feet. "Where were you supposed to be when you shot him?" she asked bluntly. "And how did Maurice Belding find out about it?"

The girl threw herself back on the bed and covered her eyes with her crooked arm. "I don't want to talk about it any more," she cried. "I won't. I won't think about it, even."

Her voice rose with each word, and Janet crossed the room away from her. She couldn't use a hysterical woman right now, and Ruth Winton was only a little away from the blow-off. She lighted a fresh cigarette and tried to look at the problem before her without emotion. If she were in it alone, she'd be pulling out right now and dumping the facts, complete with footnotes, into the lap of a hard-boiled city editor, who would know just what to do with them. But she'd pulled Remington in, and she wasn't free of the mess until he was out—or until she knew what had happened to him.

"I'll have to see this Maurice Belding," she said huskily. "Saint or sinner, he's messed around too much."

Even as she phrased the thought, she was aware that she was not even sure of that simple fact. She knew what Ruth Winton had told her, but Ruth Winton didn't know herself if her memory could be believed—or Ruth Winton was playing an unholy deep game and building up the background for some fantastic revelation.

"I don't believe she killed him," she said. "I won't believe it. But she might be protecting somebody."

On the other hand, Maurice Belding might be protecting her. On the evidence, he might be in love with her and he was young enough to jump into the role of buffer between a young girl and disaster. If he were in love with her, the whole list of possibilities would be changed.

Instead of a vicious ghost trust, there would be nothing to the mystery but a case of common jealousy or still more common greed. Belding could want the girl for himself and be driven to desperation by the thought of Peter Mott having her—or he could be a fortune hunter with his eyes fixed on the chance of a lifetime. As Philip Coder's attorney, he was in a position to know just how good a chance Ruth Winton would be.

For the first time, a doubt of Grover Remington entered Janet Starr's mind. She could see how the police felt about him. If there wasn't a sinister background of ghost-trust activity to consider, this case would resolve itself naturally into the common elements of ordinary murder cases. The occult touch muddied every stream of thought.

Pinching out her cigarette, Janet turned to the door. Outside of the room, the hallways would be black, and Death might still be stalking in the darkness, but she was less sure now that the girl was in danger. Ruth Winton was dangerous to Ruth Winton before she was dangerous to anyone else.

"I've got to see this Belding."

Janet's hand was on the knob. Her nose wrinkled, and she turned back, startled, into the room. Her cigarettes were cold in the ash tray where she had put them. She sniffed again, then she threw the door open, and reeled back with a startled cry.

Smoke rolled against her in a choking cloud through which she could see waving pennants of flame and hear the sharp cracking sound of the demon's whips.

"The candle! Mrs. Coder!"

The words were wrenched from her lips. She turned toward the room next door, where Clara Coder had kept her rendezvous with the dead, but she couldn't get near it. Gasping, she retreated swiftly into the room again and slammed the heavy oak door into place.

She recalled the rapt expression on Clara Coder's face as she knelt beside the bed with the lighted candle near by. The woman had been oblivious to the fire hazard and to everything else. If she had waited tonight for some accustomed signal, she had waited too long—and in vain. There was a man who had fled when that shot rang out from downstairs, and Janet had not forgotten him.

Ruth Winton was sitting up on the bed now. There was a new fear in her face as the curling streamers of smoke drifted across the room.

"What . . . what is it?" she gasped.

Janet had crossed to the window. She threw it up and the draft sucked fresh smoke into the room through keyhole and crevice. Beneath the window there was only the sheer side of the house with a cement walk below, and an iron railing which ran around a small flower bed. She bit her lip. It was not far to drop, but a broken leg was a good bet. She whirled again into the room, slamming the window closed behind her.

It was an old-fashioned house, and there was a washbasin built into a corner of the room. As she saturated a handful of towels, Janet realized suddenly what had made the corner of Robert Winton's room so bare. The washbasin had been removed.

It was a passing thought. She had no time to dwell on it. The closing of the window had stopped

the through draft, and there was less smoke in the room, but the fire would make fast headway in the hall. Janet threw two of the wet towels to the dazed girl on the bed.

"Hold those across your nose and mouth," she said. "We've got to go through it."

She had to grip the girl's arm and propel her toward the door. As she swung it open, the smoke hit her like a solid wall. Ruth hung back momentarily, then plunged forward beside her.

It was like diving into a sea of ink. The choking blackness engulfed them as they struggled blindly toward the all-too-distant stairs. Janet touched the wall once with groping fingers, then abruptly drew her fingers back. The walls were blistering.

Ruth went to her knees, and Janet had to pause and heave her to her feet. She nearly lost her sense of direction then, but the smoke was rushing toward the stair well, and she followed it. A choking voice called, and she managed an answer through cracked, hard lips.

"Here!" she called. "Here! We can't go much farther."

Heels hit the floor hard, and a vague figure lunged through the smoke. Janet felt strong arms around her and a sudden relief at surrendering Ruth's dead weight. She heard a hoarse voice saying over and over:

"Ruth. Are you hurt, darling? Just a few moments—"

It was babbling, incoherent talk imperfectly heard, and it made no clear impression upon Janet. Her lungs filled with smoke and she coughed. Then, coughing, she plunged down the stairs.

It was cooler at the bottom, and she could look up at the red-hearted smoke as it threw out futile tentacles in an effort to drag her back. The man who had come to the rescue reeled past her. He was stocky and light-haired and dressed in a gray suit. There was something familiar about him, but Janet did not know just what. She did not have the energy to puzzle it out. A veritable Niagara of smoke was dropping over the top banister into the stair well, but the hall was large. She remembered the telephone on the stand beyond the study door.

"I've got to reach it," she said grimly. "I've got to."

Desperation put spring into her legs, and she raced toward it at a shaky trot. In the pale light, the instrument stood proudly upon its pedestal, the one sane, modern, scientific thing in the mad weirdness of this ghost-ridden mansion. It was the modern symbol of the boy of the burning deck, this faithful instrument which waited to carry messages while people remained to send them. Janet clutched at it eagerly.

The sound of her own voice startled her. It was like the croaking of a frog. "Police department!"

She hung on the line for what seemed hours while her own words echoed and re-echoed in her brain, then a voice answered and she shook herself.

"Homicide!"

The line buzzed and sang, then a heavy voice growled, and she gasped with relief. "Hurry!" she cried. "The Winton mansion! Please come! Murder here! Hurry!"

She heard a step behind her as she slapped the receiver back. Austin, the little Englishman, was bearing down on her, his lips curled in a snarl. Off behind him she heard the wailing of sirens, the snorting of trucks. The fire department was swinging into action.

"Who are you calling there? Come away from that!"

Austin's voice was gruff, but Janet scarcely heard it. Her hand had closed instinctively upon her bag which was tucked snugly down in front of her dress.

In that bag she had a button that she had torn from the man who had knocked her down in the hall—and there was a button missing from Austin's gray suit.

X.

Jeff Scanlon of the homicide squad had his hands rammed in his pockets, and a sour look on his grim face. He'd been having a rocky time of it with a lot of smoke-sick, nervous people, and he was fed up. Philip Coder was shaking a bony fist at him.

"It's an outrage," he shouted. "I've been burned out of my home. My wife is in the hospital. Yet you stand there and tell me that I have to stand for a police investigation! I'll break you for this."

"I'm sorry." Scanlon's face was a good match for his red hair as he struggled to be polite under difficulties. "When we get a funny fire and somebody makes a murder charge, we've simply got to look into it and—"

"Funny fire?" Coder poised one fist in the air.

Scanlon waved a hairy hand.

"Queer, maybe. No explanation for it. Somebody says a murder is being covered up. That's happened before, hasn't it? Let's get those questions answered."

He looked around grimly. There was a sorry, sullen company seated in the living quarters of the chauffeur's apartment above the garage.

Maurice Belding had his chin on his chest, his long legs spread out before him. He was dirty and smoky, but in a picturesque way. He managed to look handsome despite the effects of fire and flood. Ruth Winton, her eyes bloodshot and half closed, was slumped in another chair beside the man in gray, who had one hand bandaged. Janet was sitting across the room from the others. She hadn't seen a mirror, and she didn't want to see one. She could make a few guesses.

She was wet for one thing, and she smelled of smoke. Her mind wasn't any too clear about the wetting. She just remembered up to the point where she got clear of the building into a muddle

of firemen. Then she was on the ground, and somebody had spilled a lot of water over her, and the police that she had sent for were on the job.

Scanlon was chewing gum. He shifted the quid into his left cheek, where it bulged, and he looked toward a brown-suited stalwart individual named Kopf, who had come out on the call with him. "All here?" he asked.

"All but the butler. The boys are looking for him." Kopf was standing near the door.

Scanlon shifted his gaze to Janet.

"You're the one who made the charges. What about this butler?"

Janet swallowed hard. "His name's Austin," she said. "He tried to keep me from phoning to you. He threatened me and pushed me away from the phone. He was too late. I started down the hall ahead of him, and suddenly I missed him. I looked around, and he was gone."

"Vanished, eh?" Scanlon looked at her sharply.

Janet nodded.

"Yes," she said.

Scanlon's expression turned sour, and she flushed. Looking at it from the police standpoint, it was a funny statement, but it was too late to change it. Scanlon bore down on her.

"You told me over the phone, and you've told me since, that there was murder committed in that house before the fire, that somebody was covering up. Now, spill it. I've got everybody here to listen to you."

Janet straightened. "Yes," she said. "Grover Remington was shot in that house less than an hour ago."

"Remington?" Scanlon looked startled.

Janet took a deep breath.

"He was talking to Mr. Coder," she said. "Ruth Winton and Mr. Belding were in the museum." Her voice trailed off. The consternation that she had expected to see on the faces of these people did not show. Instead, they were looking at her in well-simulated amazement; at least, three of them were.

Philip Coder's face had flowed back into the poker mold. He snorted.

"The girl has had a trying experience," she said. "She's imagining things."

Janet's eyes blazed. She was looking straight at Ruth Winton, but the girl didn't meet her eyes. "Look at me!" she cried. "You know that you told me—"

"Never mind what she told you! What do you know?" Scanlon's voice was hard.

"I know that Grover Remington went in that house and—"

"Did you see him go in?"

Janet faltered. She'd been awfully sure of herself, but she could look ahead now and see of what frail stuff her case was built. There was a difference between knowledge and evidence, that she was grasping fully for the first time. Scanlon's eyes were pitiless.

"You didn't see Remington go in and you didn't see him shot?"

"No, but—"

"And yet you bring accusations of murder?"

Janet didn't look at the others now. She was driven onto the defensive. "You don't understand," she said desperately. "There's something terribly wrong. Maurice Belding is the one who took that body to the cemetery and—"

Scanlon stopped her with a sweeping gesture. "I don't want to hear the rest," he said. He took his hands out of his pockets and spread them helplessly as he looked toward Philip Coder.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Coder," he said. "I had to take a look. But this kind of thing happens all the time. People come in and confess to things they never did, and they solve crimes for us and tell us who killed who and why—and, well, we just gotta take a look."

Philip Coder rose from his chair with dignity. "It's perfectly all right," he said slowly. "I understand the situation now. The young lady was a guest at my home. She pretended to be Miss Corliss, a nurse. I know now that she isn't."

Janet felt unfriendly eyes on her. She clenched her fists and bounded to her feet. "I won't have that done to me," she said. "I came under that name because Ruth Winton begged me to. She wrote me a letter because she was afraid."

Scanlon was looking at her as he had looked at Slug Deshler in the cemetery. "Where's the letter?" he asked.

Janet opened her bag and stopped with the gesture. She remembered suddenly that she had given that letter to Grover Remington.

Scanlon took a step forward, took the bag right out of her hand, and possessed himself of the tiny automatic. He lifted it carefully and sniffed at it while he signaled with one raised eyebrow to the man in the doorway. Kopf took a step forward. Janet half turned, then swung back.

"If you're looking for the gun that killed Peter Mott," she said, "you're looking in the wrong place. If you'll only listen to me!"

"Where would I find it?" Scanlon's tone was suddenly indulgent.

"You could ask Ruth Winton!" Janet was suddenly savage. She felt betrayed.

Kopf touched her shoulder, and she heard Scanlon's voice as from a great distance.

"You're late on that case," he said. "I've got Slug Deshler in the can, and I've got his confession on my desk. What else do you know that's new?"

There was a wealth of sarcasm in his voice, and he seemed to be trying to heap on ridicule now to placate the others for any trouble that her charges may have brought them. She sensed all that, and

knew that she should keep her mouth shut until she had her paper in back of her, or a more favorable opportunity to talk. But the position in which she found herself was too intolerable, and she had a desperate feeling that an opportunity was slipping away, that these people would get away scot-free of investigation unless the could make someone listen to her now. She pulled savagely away from Kopf and faced the room.

Maurice Belding was studying her with one eyebrow raised quizzically. Ruth Winton was looking at the floor. Philip Coder was standing. He looked strangely human and sympathetic, but she knew of no appeal that would touch him. The man in gray alone showed genuine interest in what she was trying to tell. There was a worried frown on his face, and he had the fingers of his two powerful hands laced together.

"You . . . you know something about this," she said. "Who are you?"

The man flushed, started to rise and sank back awkwardly. "Hooper," he said, "Jack Hooper. Mr. Coder's chauffeur."

"The chauffeur!" Janet's eyes widened. She remembered that it was the chauffeur who supposedly did odd jobs for Ruth Winton, and that it was he who mailed the letter to her at the *Times-Herald*. She whirled furiously on Ruth Winton.

"You . . . you told me that he was a Jap!" she said.

Scanlon laughed out loud. "Take her home, Kopf," he said, "and have a doctor look in on her before you leave."

"No!" Janet shrank back. "No! I—"

She broke off as the door opened to the touch of a man in conventional evening clothes—a man with a black mustache, who wore a turban of bandage upon his head, and who carried a cane which hung debonairly on his forearm as he slowly stripped off his gloves.

"'No' is the right answer," he said. "My dear Scanlon, in the words of the poet, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Janet gasped, and her legs started to give way as she groped for a chair.

"Grover Remington!" she said. "Grover Remington!"

XI.

Jeff Scanlon rocked back on his heels and then anchored himself, his weight balanced forward. His eyes swept swiftly from Janet Starr to the smiling Remington.

"What is this, an act?" he growled. "Grab that guy, Kopf. He's under arrest."

"Never mind. I'll vouch for him." Captain Dave McCall shouldered his way into the room as Remington stepped aside. McCall's ordinarily red face was gray and lined with weariness, but there was a purposeful look in his eyes as he faced the little group in the room.

Philip Coder lunged to his feet.

"I don't care who you vouch for," he said. "I demand the arrest of that girl and her accomplice on the grounds of malicious mischief, blackmail, or whatever the legal classification of these charges may be. I—"

Maurice Belding gripped his elbow. "Let me handle it, Mr. Coder," he said. He turned to McCall. "Captain, I offered no objection to Lieutenant Scanlon's inquiry. I do object to any further annoyance of my client or his daughter, whether under the guise of an investigation or under any other guise. You are without authority to—"

McCall shrugged. Very deliberately he reached into his pocket, withdrew a .22-caliber automatic, and tossed it on the table. "That is the gun with which Peter Mott was shot," he said. "Our ballistic expert has made tests. The gun was found in the museum of your home, Mr. Coder." He shrugged again. "I can compel no one to remain here and answer questions. I advise each of you against leaving."

There was challenge in his eyes and in the quiet tone of his voice. Maurice Belding stared at the gun, a stunned look in his eyes. Philip Coder's jaw dropped. He opened and closed his hands.

"You have the advantage on us, captain," he said. "I'd like to hear about that gun."

McCall gave no evidence of the fact that he was conscious of having scored a victory. "My assistant, Mr. Grove," he said, "will demonstrate a few facts which have developed. I believe that you will be interested. Sit down where you are, Scanlon."

He took a few steps backward, himself, and stood with his back to the door. Maurice Belding was on the point of sitting down, but he came up straight at the mention of the name "Grove."

"Captain," he said, "this is very irregular. That man's name is Grover Remington."

McCall looked past him. Remington eyed him with a new interest. "It will still be a good show, Mr. Belding," he said. "You are not leaving, are you?"

Belding wasn't. He stood where he was for a moment, then he swore softly and sat down. Remington had been quietly sizing up the lights and the shadows and the props in the room. He was the showman again, with an audience and a presentation. He never neglected effects.

"Miss Starr was painfully ridiculed a few minutes ago," Remington said. "That is unfortunate, because Miss Starr made no ridiculous statements." He leaned forward earnestly. "You laughed when she said that Austin, the butler, disappeared, but you didn't produce him."

His eyes challenged Coder. "She drew your fire by stating that Grover Remington was murdered in your home. She was slightly in error." His lips

twisted sardonically. "But Grover Remington was the victim of an unwarranted assault in your home." His eyes were suddenly hard, and he bowed stiffly to the uncomfortable Scanlon. "That, lieutenant, can be proved."

Philip Coder half rose, shrugged, and sank back into his chair. "Have your say," he growled.

"Thank you." Remington spread his open palm, closed his hand with a conjurer's motion, and reached into the air above Ruth Winton's head.

The sheet of paper that appeared in his hand seemed to come from out of nowhere.

"Despite the reputation which ghosts have around here," he said, "they had nothing to do with that. It is the letter that Ruth Winton wrote to Janet Starr. It has interesting bits in it. It states, for instance, that Peter Mott disappeared during a séance in this house. Take care of it, captain."

He flipped the paper to McCall, who was nervously alert despite his relaxed pose against the door.

Philip Coder gripped the arms of his chair. "I don't believe that," he said.

He broke off abruptly as he got a look at his stepdaughter's face. She was paper-white and struggling to rise from her chair. The man in gray gripped her by the arm. Remington made a swift movement with his hand, as though banishing something from his sight.

"She was mistaken, of course," he said softly. "Peter Mott didn't disappear from a séance. He wasn't killed in the Winton mansion. He was killed in his own car by someone that he trusted enough to take riding."

There was a lessening of tension in the room. Scanlon shifted in his chair. Remington suddenly dropped his casual air. Something deadly crept in his expression—something, perhaps, that had been part of the man before he ever practiced magic before the footlights.

"To understand Peter Mott's death, you have to understand the organization to which he belonged. He was a ghoul, a robber of the dead." With one hand he waved back Philip Coder, who had been the dead man's friend. By sheer dramatic force, he got away with it. "Peter Mott," he said, "was a moving spirit in a nation-wide organization that feeds on sorrow, on grief. That organization watches the big fortunes of America.

"When a rich man, a successful man, fails in health, the campaign starts. Often it starts before that. Servants are worked into his household who are good servants, but who are also built of the stuff that goes into the make-up of a spy in war time. They draw two salaries, and for years they may not do a thing to earn them. Lawyers and accountants and other professional men work into the rich man's organization, into his social life—and they, too, are operatives under orders."

Remington paused. From somewhere behind him, he produced a clumsy bundle, and, as he moved with it toward the table, the light paper wrappings fell away.

Grinning with ghastly mirth at the tense audience was an old and yellow skull.

Remington looked at it. "When the man dies," he said solemnly, "this kind of thing starts to happen. There is evidence of a restless spirit in his old home. Servants planted long ago begin to earn their double salaries, and the house becomes haunted. Some member of the family is soon ripe to become a convert to a very special spiritualistic cult. A medium appears from outside or inside the home. Weak heirs become the victims of badger games, gambling schemes, blackmail stunts. If they commit suicide out of despair, they become the trained ghosts of the mediums."

Philip Coder lunged to his feet. "For Heaven's sake, man," he said, "to what purpose is all this?"

Remington looked at him quietly. "Money," he said. "The ghouls obtain a dozen grips upon the fortune. Some of it is willed to some temple or

some cult, some of it is simply grafted or blackmailed out of heirs." He paused. "Some of it is obtained through marriage."

Maurice Belding moved his chair back noisily. "This is outrageous," he said. "This is not a police investigation."

"And I am not a policeman. You are at liberty to leave." Remington stared at him, and for only a second or two did Maurice Belding stare back. He relaxed with a curse. Remington put his hands behind his back.

"Peter Mott," he said, "would have married Darius Winton's fortune, and he'd have given the lion's share of it to the ring that was behind him. He was killed before he had the opportunity."

"I demand evidence of that, tangible evidence—witnesses."

Philip Coder was on his feet, his outstretched hand trembling. Remington shrugged and looked toward Ruth Winton.

The girl seemed unaware of what was going on. She was staring at the skull, and her eyes were curiously flat and lacking in expression. Remington's voice dropped, and he took a step toward her.

"You have seen that skull before, Ruth," he said quietly.

"Yes. Always. Always."

"It talks to you, commands you."

"Yes! Yes!"

Remington straightened. "Ruth," he said solemnly, "your stepfather killed Peter Mott, didn't he?"

The girl stiffened, and a groan came from her lips. "Yes. Yes," she said. "He killed him."

Philip Coder rocked backward, caught his balance, and kicked his chair over. Maurice Belding came to his feet with a jerky, jackknife movement. Remington snapped his fingers.

"That's testimony for you, Mr. Coder. That's evidence. That is the word of your own stepdaughter."

He stopped and spead his hands. "It's evidence," he repeated, "but it's worthless. You didn't kill him and I know it."

XII.

The room could scarcely have been more shaken by an explosion. After a stunned second, Philip Coder sank into his chair and dropped his head into his hands. Maurice Belding remained on his feet, but he was gripping the back of his chair with both hands. Ruth Winton was crying softly, and Janet Starr was trying to comfort her, her wide eyes fixed on Remington. Jack Hooper, the chauffeur, had his fists clenched, and there was hot hatred in his eyes.

Philip Coder rose shakily out of his chair. He didn't look at Remington. "Captain McCall," he said, "no man has the right to do what this man did to my stepdaughter and, through her, to me. He hypnotized her for a cheap effect."

McCall shook his head. "He only showed you what had been done to her by others," he said. "If he hadn't convinced me of many things that I didn't believe at first, I wouldn't be letting him make this demonstration."

Janet Starr was still patting the girl's hands. "Please, Mr. Coder," she said. "I know. Ruth doesn't know what to believe. Somebody's been hypnotizing her for some reason, convincing her of things."

"For what reason?" Coder rocked on his feet.

Both Janet and McCall looked at Remington.

Remington shrugged. "The skull was the instrument," he said casually. "It was used to focus her attention. She came so completely under control that she couldn't look at the skull without passing under hypnosis. A whispered suggestion at such a time would implant a belief that she carried over into consciousness. Suppose we let the skull tell why it was done."

"Let the skull?" Philip Coder sat down abruptly.

Remington turned to the door.

"Austin!" he said.

McCall stepped away from the door. It opened, and the little Englishman, Austin, walked into the room. He was wearing the white robes of the séance chamber, and he did not look at anyone in the room. Behind him marched Detective Cash-on-delivery Gale.

Remington bowed. "We will have a typical Winton mansion séance," he said dryly.

Scanlon got up abruptly as Remington jerked the table away from in front of him and set it up with a flip in the middle of the room. He confiscated the detective's chair, too, and Austin sat in it—indifferent, seemingly, to the eyes fixed on him. He drew the skull over in front of him, and accepted the crystal ball which Gale had carried for him.

"We won't need to hold hands," Remington said, "but we'll have the lights out."

He looked at McCall, and McCall hesitated a moment, his eyes sweeping the room. Then, with a slight shake of his shoulders, McCall threw the room into darkness.

For a second, there was neither sound nor movement. Then the crystal glowed, and, within the spreading pool of light, there was a pair of hands that hovered above the ball. The skull grinned in the dark. Remington spoke solemnly from somewhere behind the table.

"Ruth Winton was instructed first to the effect that Peter Mott had vanished during a séance. She was convinced of it. Why?"

There was a pause. Then the skull moved. The ghastly mouth opened and closed as husky, whispered words came from the table top.

"Because Peter Mott had disappeared. He was not found dead. He would always be missing.

The man who killed him did not believe he would be found."

"Why make Ruth Winton believe anything about it, then?"

"Because the killer did not want anyone to say anything that would bring the police to the Winton mansion with questions. It was the last place Peter Mott was seen alive. The police mustn't know that. Philip Coder knew that Peter Mott did not disappear during the séance. He left the house. Philip Coder would keep everyone silent rather than have his stepdaughter make silly statements and call attention to his wife's condition. The world would say they were both crazy."

The skull moved lightly about the table top, and it conveyed an impression of chattiness. Remington's voice broke in.

"Why change the story and convince her that she shot him herself?"

"Because he was found dead. If Philip Coder had a stepdaughter to protect, he'd be putty for the killer."

"And the killer was who?"

The skull danced lightly, but it never answered the question. There was a spiteful crack and a splash of flame. A woman screamed, and the lights came on as a man smashed at McCall and tried to make the hall.

Scanlon was standing in the corner of the room behind the séance table, and he still held the .22 automatic that he had taken from Janet Starr. It leaped to position, and he fired across the room as McCall straight-armed the man who had attacked him. The man stiffened and turned halfway around. He was raising his gun when Scanlon got him the second time.

Grover Remington rose slowly from behind the séance table. There was a hole in his white shirt front, but no blood. He held his side gingerly and shook his head.

"That, Belding," he said, "is the second shot you've had at me. And you don't collect—"

Maurice Belding was struggling to rise from the floor. He had two .22 slugs in him and he was knocked groggy; but Scanlon had placed his shots. They had taken the man high—in the shoulder and upper arm.

Belding slumped forward, and McCall dropped down on one knee beside him. Gale crossed the room, and an emergency kit came out of his pocket as though by magic. Remington resumed his seat behind the table and smiled at Janet Starr, who was staring at the strange spectacle of an heiress to millions in the arms of her stepfather's chauffeur.

Philip Coder, too, was staring, but his eyes kept wandering to where the two police officers worked over Maurice Belding. Remington put his finger into the bullet hole in his shirt as Janet looked at him. With one gesture, he ripped the fabric down the front.

"Magician's bulletproof vest," he said. "Very handy in firearm acts." He held his hands over the crystal ball, and it glowed with light. Very slowly, he turned his arm to show the twin electrical contacts peeping out from his shirt cuff.

"You have to turn the ball a certain way," he said, "to make the other contacts come out."

With a smile of disdain, he ducked his head and, by a twist of his body, brought the mouthpiece of a medium's trumpet out of his coat to where his teeth could grip it.

"This is your spook," he said.

The tones were sepulchral and the words seemed to come from the table top upon which the wide end of the trumpet rested. The skull moved and the mouth opened and closed. Remington rose to his feet and picked up a rubber ball from the floor—a ball to which a rubber tube was attached. He tipped the skull over and showed the other end of the tube.

"Children have rabbits at Easter time that work the same way," he said. "The real skull is on the floor. Usually it is under the medium's robe. He makes the substitution when the lights go out. This one is papier-mâché."

He crossed to where Maurice Belding was rapidly struggling back to consciousness.

Philip Coder gripped his arm. "Why?" he asked huskily. "Why?"

"I told you why. Money. Mott was an attorney, but it wasn't his job to be your attorney. His job was to be your friend and influence your appointment of an attorney. Then it was his job to marry into the money that you, yourself, couldn't touch."

"But Belding. I trusted Belding."

"You were supposed to. You trusted Mott. Belding just tried to promote himself with a .22."

Coder was running his hand through his hair. "And Austin?"

"Was a private soldier in the ghost army. He didn't do anything murderous. He spied and he played spook and he talked to your wife in your dead stepson's room through a pipe that ran from the room next to it. And he conducted séances."

Coder looked around. "Where is he?"

"Out in the hall with a cop holding his hand. He's our witness." McCall spoke from the floor. He was dusting his hands as he stood up. His eyes were hard when they rested on Philip Coder.

"You played tough with us," he said. "I could plaster a charge on you."

"Eh? What?" Coder's eyes were wide.

"Accessory to assault with a gun. Remington was shot in your presence. You covered up."

Remington laughed. "Austin will clear that, too," he said. "He snaked me out of the room into the museum when you ran out with Belding to look for the man who shot me. Then he told you I socked him and escaped. That made me look like a criminal to you."

"And like a dead man to me?" Janet Starr was standing with her hands on her hips. "I wasted a lot of worry on you."

"Sorry." Remington bowed. "It was really a break. I was wearing a wig, you know, for the reporter disguise, and Belding just creased my actual skull. Then Austin"—he shrugged—"didn't know how I made my living. He *tied* me up in the museum."

The uniformed cop opened the door. "The reporters are raising hell," he said.

"Reporters?" Janet stiffened.

McCall looked at her apologetically. "I couldn't keep 'em from smelling something. They tailed out," he said.

Janet slumped. "My story!" she wailed.

Remington flipped his thumb toward Ruth Winton, who was still in the embrace of a young man in a gray suit named Jack Hooper—a young man who had tried his hand at playing detective without getting too far.

"You're not a reporter, anyway," he said. "There's a hot column editorial for you. She's been married to him for a month, and she's just told the old man. Write it up. The moral is that you can't protect the young or something. She was waiting for her money before she broke it, and a lot happened to her."

Janet turned to the door. "I'm going home," she said.

The eyes of Grover Remington and Dave McCall met, and McCall wasn't thinking of any warrants for extortion. There was a silent pledge in that exchange of glances. Remington might still be officially a fugitive, but McCall was willing to hear things about the ghost trust hereafter. It was a victory.

Janet was nearly to the stairs when Remington caught up. "I've still got a car," he said. "I'll take you home."

She shook her head. "After the way you hypnotize girls? Nothing doing."

Remington raised his hand and, with a deft motion, removed the black mustache that had been part of his act. "Fear not, fair lady," he said lightly. "I have no mustache to deceive you."

THE END.

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